

# Battered Women's Reports of Their Partners' and Their Children's Cruelty to Animals

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Originally published in *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, Vol. 1(1) 1998

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**ABSTRACT.** Anecdotal reports of cruelty to pet animals in families where partner battering occurs are common but there exist few empirical data on this issue. Determining the forms and prevalence of such cruelty is important since abuse of pets may be a method batterers use to control their partners, may be related to batterers' lethality, and may result in children in such families being exposed to multiple forms of violence, a significant risk for mental health problems. Thirty-eight women seeking shelter at a safe house for battered partners voluntarily completed surveys about pet ownership and violence to pets. Of the women reporting current or past pet ownership, 71% reported that their partner had threatened and/or actually hurt or killed one or more of their pets. Actual (as distinct from threatened) harm to pets represented the majority (57%) of reports. Fifty-eight percent of the full sample of women had children and 32% of these women reported that one or more of their children had hurt or killed pet animals; in 71% of these cases, the women had also reported animal abuse (threatened or actual) by their partner. This study represents one of the first empirical analyses of the prevalence of animal maltreatment in a sample of battered women. The high prevalence rate of batterers' threatened or actual harm of animals and the relatively high rate of animal abuse reported for the children in this sample are relevant for future research and policy analyses. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworth.com](mailto:getinfo@haworth.com)]

Pets were terribly important to her; they were her only source of comfort and affection. One afternoon, Billy said he had had it with her damn cats and started screaming that he was going to kill them. Kim didn't take it too seriously. (Browne, 1987, p. 154)

. . . Aubrey got angry with the family dog for straying outside their yard. He loaded one of his nine guns, then shot and killed it. The kids began to sob, devastated. He grabbed (one child's) hair . . . slapped another of the kids, then began crying himself. Joyce tried to comfort them all. But her feelings of anger were mixed with genuine terror: in a moment of rage, she knew, Aubrey could kill any one of them and cry about it afterward. (Walker, 1989, pp. 20-21)

These examples associating partner abuse with cruelty to animals and, in one case, child maltreatment are but two of the many anecdotal references to the abuse of animals in the literature on domestic violence (Adams, 1994). Following an analysis of existing research and policy issues relevant for understanding the relation between domestic violence and animal maltreatment, the results of a small-scale descriptive study of the prevalence of animal cruelty experiences in a shelter sample of battered women are reported. Implications for future research and for the well-being of women and children experiencing family violence are then discussed.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In an earlier paper (Ascione, 1993), existing research on childhood cruelty to animals, its relation to various forms of family and community violence, and its significance as a symptom of Conduct Disorder are reviewed. The clearest evidence of this relationship is found in studies of the effects of physical and sexual abuse on children. Relatively less information is available on the effects of exposure to domestic violence on children's relations with pets and other animals. Adult partner cruelty to animals has been described anecdotally (e.g., Dutton, 1992; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Walker, 1979), and includes references to partners torturing or killing animals and forcing women to engage in bestiality. In one of the rare empirical studies including examination of the domestic violence/animal maltreatment relation, Renzetti (1992) found that 38% of women with pets in abusive lesbian relationships reported maltreatment of pets by their partners. The effects of partner animal abuse on the women whose animals are hurt or killed and the effects of witnessing both parent and pet abuse on children's mental health warrant more focused research attention.

### *Partners' Abuse of Animals*

Information about the forms and prevalence of cruelty to animals in families experiencing domestic violence is not easily culled from existing research. One reason is the inconsistency, across studies, in whether questions about animal maltreatment are included in assessments. In some cases, data about animal abuse may be incorporated, explicitly or implicitly, under more general categories of abuse. For example, in Walker's (1984) interviews with battered women, bestiality was mentioned as an example of "unusual sex acts" the women were asked to perform by their partners. In the group of women who had experienced relationships with battering and non-battering partners, this experience was reported by 41% and 5%, respectively. Walker also reported that, when with a batterer, 16% of the women reported directing their own anger at their "children or pets"; when with a non-batterer, the figure was 3%. In a similar vein, cruelty to animals may be implicit in measures of psychological maltreatment. Brassard, Hart, and Hardy's (1993) categories of "Terrorizing" (including ". . . threats directed toward loved ones or objects . . .") and "Exploiting / Corrupting" (including ". . . modeling antisocial acts . . .") are examples.

Occasionally, specific items related to animal maltreatment appear in domestic violence questionnaires or checklists. Renzetti's (1992) study is one example. Another is Dutton's (1992) "Abusive Behavior Observation Checklist" in which being "required to be involved with an animal in a sexual way" is an item under the "unwanted sexual behavior" category (p. 160) and "abused your/his/her family pets" is listed under "Psychological Abuse-Intimidation" (p. 161).

Domestic violence and cruelty to animals are, at times, examined together in discussions of assessing partner dangerousness or lethality (Campbell, 1995). One assessment, proposed by Straus (1993) to facilitate identification of "high risk violence," includes the item, "threats or actual killing or injuring a pet." However, another dangerousness assessment inventory does not mention animal maltreatment in any form (Stuart & Campbell, 1989).

### *Children's Abuse of Animals*

The literature on the effects of exposure to domestic violence on children's mental health has been recently reviewed by Jaffe and Sudermann (1995) who note the complexity and variability of such

effects from one study to another. Cruelty to animals as a childhood reaction to exposure to domestic violence has not been directly explored. Suggestive information, however, can be derived from studies of children of battered women in which externalizing problems and/or conduct disorder symptoms are examined [since the 1987 revision, both the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd edition revised) and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edition) (American Psychiatric Association 1987, 1994) include physical cruelty to animals as a symptom of Conduct Disorder].

One recent study that included a sample of both sheltered and community battered women and their 6-12 year old children found that domestic violence was related to ". . . children's general psychopathology . . ." (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995). The authors report that women's partners' hurting or killing pets did load (albeit, at a low level) on a factor labeled, "escalated aggression," a factor that included other severe forms of threatened or actual interpersonal aggression. Other studies have also found a relationship between observing domestic violence and externalizing psychological symptoms both in preschool-age children at a shelter or residing at home (Fantuzzo et al., 1991) and in an older (8-12 year old) sample of Israeli children living at home (Sternberg et al., 1993). However, it is unclear how often externalizing symptomatology manifests itself in the form of cruelty to animals since reports rarely describe, understandably, results for individual items on assessment inventories. It should also be noted that in Sternberg et al.'s study, and in a similar study with a shelter sample (O'Keefe, 1995), child outcomes may vary depending on whether the child was physically abused in addition to being exposed to partner abuse.

Given the recent upsurge in concern with the deleterious effects of community or neighborhood violence on children (e.g. Taylor, Zuckerman, Harik, and Groves, 1994), it is appropriate that greater attention be given to violence that is perhaps even less escapable for children: violence among family members in one's home. This issue is receiving cross-cultural and international attention (Levinson, 1989; Patrignani & Belle, 1995). However, examination of the confluence of partner abuse, child abuse, and the maltreatment of animals is in its infancy. Greater attention is being given, at a national policy level, to the overlap between partner abuse of women and child maltreatment (Ascione, 1995; Dykstra, 1995; Koss et al., 1994; Schechter & Edelson, 1995), and between the abuse of children and violence toward animals (American Humane Association, 1995; Deviney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983). The associations among all three types of domestic violence (which may also include sibling abuse: Suh & Abel, 1990; Wiehe, 1990; and elder abuse: Rosen, 1995) are only beginning to be explored (e.g., Arkow, 1995). For example, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse have been noted by Wiehe and Herring (1991) as components of sibling abuse. In the area of emotional abuse, these authors explicitly include the torture or destruction of a pet as one form of psychological maltreatment. One can only speculate if siblings, in some cases, may abuse animals as a result of observing similar abuse performed by batterers.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present study included determining: (1) the prevalence of pet ownership in a sample of women entering a shelter for battered partners in northern Utah, (2) the prevalence of threatened and/or actual harm to pets by the women's partners, and (3) evidence for animal maltreatment by the women's children. In addition to quantitative information, qualitative

information on the types of animal maltreatment described were examined. Ways that information about cruelty to animals could assist professionals who serve families experiencing domestic violence and who address animal welfare are also examined.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

Thirty-eight women seeking in-house services (as distinct from crisis telephone services) at a shelter for battered partners in northern Utah agreed to be interviewed by shelter staff about their experiences with maltreatment of pets (in a 1990 report, Rollins and Oheneba-Sakyi found Utah spouse abuse prevalence to be comparable to national estimates). The women ranged in age from 20 to 51 years (mean age = 30.2) and reported the following marital status: married-57%, separated-3%, divorced-8% and single-32%. This was the first visit to the shelter for 54% of the women; the remaining women reported an average of 1.9 prior visits (range 1-6). For the 58% of women with children, the mean number of children was 2.8 (range 1-8) and their ages ranged from 8 months to 20 years.

### *Procedures*

Women were interviewed by shelter personnel within a few days of their entry into the shelter and after the initial crisis circumstances had subsided. It was stressed that participation was confidential (only shelter staff would know participants' identities) and voluntary, and that decisions to agree to or refuse participation would not affect shelter services. None of the women approached declined participation.

The interview used an early version of the Battered Partner Shelter Survey (BPSS - Pet Maltreatment Assessment (Ascione & Weber, 1995). Given the stress associated with entering a shelter, the number of questions was kept to a minimum. Interviewers did report, however, that many of the women were appreciative that someone had finally asked them about concerns they had for their pets.

The BPSS included the following questions:

Do you now have a pet animal or animals? If yes, what kinds?

Have you had a pet animal or animals in the past 12 months? If yes, what kinds?

Has your partner ever hurt or killed one of your pets? If yes, describe.

Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets? If yes, describe.

Have you ever hurt or killed one of your pets? If yes, describe.

Have any of your children ever hurt or killed one of your pets (if client has children)? If yes, describe.

Did concern over your pet's welfare keep you from coming to this shelter sooner than now? If yes, explain.

Completed BPSS forms were coded by shelter staff and then provided to the author for tabulation and analysis. Shelter staff also provided aggregate information on participants' marital status, presence and number of children, and women's reports of prior visits to the shelter.

## RESULTS

Seventy-four percent of the women reported current pet ownership or pet ownership in the 12 months prior to the women's entry into the shelter. Of these women, 68% owned more than one pet. Dogs and cats were most common; one woman reported horses as pets, and fish, birds, chickens, rabbits, and a goat were also mentioned.

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of the women with pets reported that their male partner had threatened to hurt or kill and/or had actually hurt or killed one or more of their pets. Examples of the former included threats to put a kitten in a blender, bury a cat up to its head and "mow" it, starve a dog, and shoot and kill a cat. Actual harm or killing of animals was reported by 57% of the women with pets and included acts of omission (e.g., neglecting to feed or allow veterinary care) but most often acts of violence. Examples reported included slapping, shaking, throwing, or shooting dogs and cats, drowning a cat in a bathtub, and pouring lighter fluid on a kitten and igniting it.

Of the women with pets, two (7%) reported that they had hurt or killed one of their own pets. Both incidents were described as accidental (stepping on a kitten and running over a dog chasing the woman's car). In one case, there was also partner cruelty to animals, in the other there was none.

Twenty-two women had children and 32% (N = 7) of these women reported that one of their children (three girls and four boys) had hurt or killed a pet or pets. Behaviors ranged from sitting on a kitten and throwing a kitten against the wall to cutting a dog's fur and tail, pulling a kitten's head out of its socket, and sodomizing a cat. For 5 of these 7 cases (71%), the mother had also reported that her partner had threatened to or actually hurt or killed pets.

Eighteen percent of the women with pets reported that concern for their animals' welfare had prevented them from coming to the shelter sooner. Their concerns included worries for the animals' safety, fear of relinquishing pets to find affordable housing, placing pets with neighbors, and abandoning a pet to keep it away from the partner.

## DISCUSSION

Although this study did not include comparison samples of non-battered women or battered women who are not currently in shelters, the substantial rate of partner cruelty to animals is clearly a cause for concern. Caution must be exercised in generalizing from this study's small sample to state and national samples; however, extrapolation of this study's findings may help estimate the scope of the potential problem. For example, 3 million is a conservative estimate of the number of U.S. women assaulted by their male partners each year (see Browne, 1993). If half of these women have pets (again, a conservative estimate [Ascione, 1992]), 71% partner cruelty to animals represents hundreds of thousands of families where pet victimization, actual or threatened, is part of the landscape of terror to which some women are exposed. Using the most

recent Utah state statistics, over a thousand women in Utah alone may experience partner abuse of their pets. Abuse may include either threats or actual harm or both. Threats may be considered a less significant problem; however, Edleson and Brygger (1986) note that interventions for male batterers may reduce the frequency of abusive acts to a greater degree than threats of abuse. The latter may be more disturbing to some women.

There is some evidence that the results obtained in the present study are not unique to this particular sample of women. Arkow (1996) recently noted two surveys, one conducted in Colorado and the other in Wisconsin, in which 24% and 80%, respectively, of women seeking domestic violence assistance reported animal abuse by their partner.

Two women in the present sample admitted to hurting or killing their own pets, both described as accidental incidents. As noted earlier, Walker (1984) reported that some battered women admit to directing their anger at their children or pets and the fact that some batterers may hold women's pets hostage (Walker, 1989) may lead women to abandon their animals rather than leave them home as prey for batterers. These abandonments are understandable since shelters for battered women may not accept pets and alternative animal care may be financially difficult for a woman to arrange if she is seeking shelter for herself and her children. Programs to address this need are beginning to emerge, such as a collaborative effort in Loudoun County, Virginia among Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter, Loudoun County Animal Care and Control, the Humane Society of Loudoun County, and privately owned boarding kennels. In cases where an animal has already been hurt or killed, women (and their children) may be experiencing unresolved grief about pet loss that may need to be acknowledged and addressed by shelter staff or counselors.

A number of practical and policy issues are raised when implementing programs to board animals of women who enter shelters (health, space, and animal / child management issues usually preclude allowing pets in such facilities). First, domestic violence shelter staff need to be trained about the potential significance of separation from pets and animal cruelty as additional emotional stressors for their clients, both women and children. Intake forms should include items related to women's experience of animal abuse and these items should also be added to the list of questions asked by crisis telephone line workers. Second, information about animal abuse may be valuable in developing safety plans for women who remain at home with their abusers and for those women planning to return home after a shelter stay. Third, if a woman places her pet for boarding, animal shelters need to develop policies ensuring the confidentiality of such placements and methods to deal with a batterer who attempts to claim a pet (in some cases, as a method of further coercing or intimidating his partner).

The reported prevalence of cruelty to animals by children in this sample is further cause for concern and is comparable to levels reported for mental health clinic samples of children, assessed with the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and its variants (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Conners, 1991), and to data from a sample of children who had been sexually abused (William Friedrich, April, 1992, personal communication). Friedrich noted that in a sample of 2-12 year olds who were substantiated victims of sexual abuse, 35% of the boys and 27% of the girls were reported to be cruel to animals on the CBCL (figures for a comparison group of nonabused boys and girls were 5% and 3%, respectively). In another report (Deviney et al., 1983), 26% of children who were physically or sexually abused and/or neglected

displayed animal maltreatment. Although causal relations cannot be determined given the present study's descriptive strategy, children observing their parents' abuse of animals (along with other forms of violent and destructive behavior) may foster imitative cruelty. Educating battered women about the significance of children's cruelty to animals as a potential symptom of psychological distress may be warranted since some women may believe such behavior is cathartic. As one of our participants said, "We were all concerned about the cat and the dog but I figured it was better that the animals were dealing with his hostility instead of the kids or myself, the spouse."

## IMPLICATIONS

Information about children's cruelty to animals may be relevant for interventions for children exposed to domestic violence. In some cases (e.g., Peled & Davis, 1995), therapy may involve asking children to identify with an animal to assist children in expressing emotions. Some children may also identify with animals as symbols of vengeance against a battering parent (e.g., Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989). Children may also identify themselves or their battered parent with a pet the children themselves have harmed. Therapists may be advised to routinely obtain information about cruelty to animals prior to using animal-related exercises. Furthermore, information about children's positive relations with and concern for their pets and other animals was not assessed in the present study but could also serve therapeutic ends (see Figure 1 where a 9 year old child has drawn himself cowering behind a couch as his mother and beloved pet bird are threatened by an abusive stepfather).

Figure 1: drawing by 9-year old boy. (Courtesy of the Center for Women and Children in Crisis, Inc., Provo, Utah)

### *Legal Implications*

The potential for cruelty to animals to be an indicator of the capacity for interpersonal violence has, in part, led to some states increasing their criminal penalties for severe animal maltreatment (one recent example is the State of Washington's 1994 revised cruelty-to-animals law). Increased penalties, including incarceration, for such cruelty can help remove violent individuals from the family and community and place them in settings where there is the potential for receiving therapy. In 1995, an Everett, Washington man received a one-year sentence (in addition to four years for intimidating a witness) after pleading guilty to first-degree animal cruelty for burning his partner's kitten in a kitchen oven ("Man gets 5 years in cat-torture case," 1995). He had also been charged with raping his partner (the witness he intimidated) but these charges were dropped in a plea bargain (the rape charge was dropped because the woman refused to press charges). As noted by one prosecutor, "We must, as prosecutors, recognize that it is unacceptable to excuse and ignore acts of cruelty toward animals. Anyone who can commit such cruelty is in desperate need of incarceration, counseling or other immediate attention. We cannot afford to accept such violence, nor will the public let us" (Ritter, 1996, p. 33).

### *Case Example*

A vivid example of the confluence of spouse battering, child abuse (emotional and physical), and

cruelty to animals is provided in recent reports of a murder trial in Salt Lake City. "Peggy Sue Brown was acquitted Thursday of fatally shooting her husband—the first time a defendant has used battered women's syndrome as a defense in a Utah murder case" (Hunt, 1996b, p. B1). "Brown testified she killed her husband after he beat, raped and locked her in a closet for days without food or water during their seven-year marriage. She said Bradley Brown, 23, had made her a virtual prisoner in their home. He also beat and terrorized their young children" (p. B8). One of Ms. Brown's children testified that Mr. Brown had on one occasion kicked her one year old brother into a wall.

The level of terror Mr. Brown apparently instilled in his family members is illustrated by another incident noted during the trial. "(He) hung a pet rabbit in the garage and summoned his wife. When she came with the baby on her shoulder, her husband began skinning the animal alive. Then he held the boy next to the screaming rabbit. 'See how easy it would be?' Bradley said" (Hunt, 1996a, p. B3).

### *Recommendations*

In addition to the relatively small and volunteer sample, this study has a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, we relied solely on women's reports of their partners', own, and children's behavior regarding the treatment of animals. Sternberg et al. (1993) have cautioned that interreporter agreement about child problems, for example, between family members experiencing domestic violence, may be low. Edleson and Brygger (1986) found that partners in battering relationships may not agree on levels of different forms of violence a batterer perpetrates. In their sample of battered men who had undergone intervention, women's and men's exact agreement, at intake, on the men's actions or threats against pets was 24%. Clearly, multisource assessments are needed in this area.

Second, sample size precluded examination of differential effects based on children's gender and age, issues Jaffe and Sudermann (1995) urged more thorough study. The present study also did not assess the levels of violence these women experienced and to which their children may have been exposed.

Third, there was no attempt to rate severity of partner cruelty to animals. More empirical information is needed about the forms, severity, and chronicity of partner cruelty to animals and its value for risk assessment (Straus, 1993), and the development of topologies of batterers (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). We have developed a protocol for assessing the animal cruelty performed by children and adolescents (Ascione, Thompson, & Black, in press) which may be applicable to adults who abuse animals.

Finally, we do not yet understand how the dimensions of partner and/or child cruelty to animals differ for families where the mother seeks shelter or decides to remain at home. Do children's relations with pets differ in these circumstances? For example, Fantuzzo et al. (1991) note how the shelter experience often entails separating children from buffers in their home environment (e.g., toys, peers). Separation from beloved pets, who may be significant sources of psychological support and attachment, may be an unaddressed issue for both the child and the battered parent.

### NOTES

- . In 1992, Utah state agencies provided shelter for 1,634 women and 2,047 children (Utah Domestic Violence Advisory Council, 1994). In 1995, the figures were 1,974 and 2,722, respectively (Diane Stuart, personal communication, January 25, 1996).
  - . For information on this program, contact the Director, Loudoun County Department of Animal Care and Control, Rt. 1, Box 985, Waterford, VA 221901 TEL 703 777-0406.
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Are battered women in domestic violence shelters forced to choose between their personal safety and that of the pets they left behind when they fled? What policies and procedures do enlightened shelters employ to deal with the issue of pet abuse by batterers as a means of manipulation? What assistance can be provided? What are the psychological ramifications of pet abuse in a domestic violence context? Dr. Frank Ascione provides the answers in *Safe Havens for Pets: Guidelines for Programs Sheltering Pets for Women Who Are Battered*. This vital work is available **FREE** thanks to funding from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. [Click here](#) for all the details. This book is must reading for every domestic violence worker, advocate, student, and supporter.

You can get more information on this subject from our [Resources](#) section [Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence](#).

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