

CRUELTY TO ANIMALS AND OTHER CRIMES

A study by the MSPCA and Northeastern University



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PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS

Introduction

Stella was a five-month-old Labrador retriever mix, good-natured, shy, and not completely housebroken. One night, after she had an accident in the house, her owner offered anyone in the room twenty-five dollars to “duke” the dog. Two men stood up. One picked up a pool cue. The other had a buck knife. They brought Stella outside and tied her to a railing. It’s not clear exactly what happened next, but a patrolman happened by, and the two men fled. The officer found young Stella still tied to the railing, stabbed in the neck and in the chest and with cuts on her head. Stella’s injuries required extensive veterinary treatment, but somehow she survived.

A reward was offered, and an informant identified all three parties. After an intensive investigation Stella finally got her day in court. As Stella’s case was being heard, a court official said quietly that he needed to move this case along--that it was, after all, “just a dog.” The judgment: continued without a finding for one year.

Who were these three men? Stella's thirty-two-year-old owner had a record of eleven other crimes, ranging from possession of stolen property to assault with a dangerous weapon. One of the men who tried to kill Stella was thirty years old and had seventeen charges on his criminal record, seven of which were for violent crimes. The other was twenty-nine years old and had thirty charges on his record, fifteen for violent offenses.

Every year, thousands of animals in the United States are victims of malicious cruelty. If these crimes had human victims, the perpetrators would face stiff penalties. But most animal abusers don't even get to court. Why? There are serious crimes against people flooding the criminal justice system, and crimes against animals are simply perceived as less important. Incidents of cruelty to animals typically are viewed as isolated offenses that have no relationship to other human behavior.

But a three-year, three-part study by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Northeastern University indicates that animal abuse crimes are anything but isolated events. The following is a summary of that study's findings.

Part One

An evaluation of cruelty to animals in Massachusetts between 1975 and 1996

The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) is a Criminal Justice Agency with the strongest law enforcement powers of any animal protection organization in the United States. MSPCA law enforcement officers are certified police officers who investigate violations of the state anti-cruelty law.

In Part One of the study, cases from the MSPCA's law enforcement files that involved intentional physical cruelty to animals were examined in detail. Of the 80,000 complaints investigated by MSPCA officers between 1975 and 1996, 268 resulted in efforts to prosecute criminally individuals who had allegedly committed intentional physical abuse of one or more animals.

Dogs and cats were the most frequent victims of abuse.

ANIMAL VICTIMS

ANIMAL	NUMBER	%
Dogs	155	57.8
Cats	72	26.9
Wildlife	14	5.2
Farm animals	8	3.0
Birds	6	2.2
Horses	3	1.1
Other	10	3.7

While dogs were more likely than cats to be harmed regardless of the prosecuted abuser's age, adults were significantly more likely to abuse dogs than cats when compared with adolescent suspects.

Although the ages of the suspected abusers in the cases examined ranged from 9 to 83, most of them were young males. Approximately 27% were adolescents (under 18 years of age), and 56% were under the age of 30. 97% of the suspects were male.

Younger suspects were significantly less likely than older ones to be alone when harming animals. While 87% of adult suspects acted alone, only about half (52%) of adolescents did so.

Beating, shooting, and stabbing were the most common methods of abuse.

METHODS OF CRUELTY

METHOD	NUMBER	%
Beat	84	31.3
Shoot	70	26.1
Stab	29	10.8
Throw	15	5.6
Burn	10	3.7
Ear/tail cut	9	3.4
Strangle	8	3.0
Drown	8	3.0
Stone/crush	8	3.0
Vehicular	8	3.0
Dog attack	6	2.2
Decapitate	5	1.9
Bait	3	1.1
Poison	2	0.7
Castrate	2	0.7
Hang	1	0.4

Adolescents were almost twice as likely as adults to beat their animal victims, and adults were almost twice as likely as adolescents to shoot animals.

Fewer than half of the 268 cases adjudicated resulted in guilty verdicts.

ADJUDICATION OF CASES

Prosecuted – Guilty	44.4%
Prosecuted - Not Guilty	5.2%
Case Dismissed	26.1%
Complainant Defaulted	4.4%
Complaint Denied by Court	4.1%
Complaint Withdrawn	2.6%
Pursued by Other Law Enforcement Authority	2.6%
Case Continued	2.2%
Other	7.3%

And sentences for abusers were light.

SENTENCING

SENTENCE	NUMBER*	AVERAGE
Fine	91	\$132
Restitution	56	\$ 99
Probation	59	5.5 months
Jail	28	4.5 months
Counseling	27	---**
Community Service	19	50 hours

*Sentences frequently contained more than a single type of penalty.

**Court-ordered counseling was always for an indeterminate length.

It's clear that the criminal justice system does not take animal abuse very seriously.

Part Two

The relationship of animal abuse to violence and other anti-social behavior

Some fascinating research has examined the relationship between cruelty to animals and other criminal behavior. In 1985, Stephen Kellert and others interviewed volunteer aggressive and violent prisoners at Leavenworth and Danbury federal penitentiaries. They learned that these individuals reportedly had committed significantly more childhood cruelty to animals than other prisoners or the general population. And in 1995, Dr. Frank Ascione found that 71% of battered women in a shelter asserted that their battering domestic partner had harmed or threatened to harm the family pet.

These two studies revealed valuable information, but they are based on self-reporting. Both began by identifying troubled people and then examining their animal-relationship histories.

In order to investigate the relationship between violence against animals and other serious crime in the general population, Part Two of the MSPCA/Northeastern study identified animal abusers--individuals who had been criminally charged with intentional physical harm to animals--and traced their other criminal behavior.

The criminal records of 153 individuals prosecuted by the MSPCA between 1975 and 1986 for intentional physical cruelty to animals were tracked for 20 years--10 years before the abuse and 10 years after. A control group was established of "next-door neighbors," people of identical gender and age who lived in the same neighborhood at the same time as the abusers. The criminal history of control group members was compiled for the same 20-year time period.

Seventy percent of the people who committed violent crimes against animals also had criminal records for violent, property, drug, or disorder crimes. When compared to their next-door neighbors, people who abused animals were five times more likely to commit violent crimes against people, four times more likely to commit property crimes, and three times more likely to have a record for drug or disorderly conduct offenses.

ANIMAL ABUSERS' CRIMINAL RECORDS

CRIME	ABUSERS	CONTROLS
Violent Crime	38%	7%
Property Crime	44%	11%
Drug Crime	37%	11%
Disorder Crime	37%	12%
Any of the 4 types of crime	70%	22%

The hypothesis that people first commit acts of cruelty to animals and then “graduate” to crimes against people was not supported by the findings of this study. More than half (59%) of the 106 animal abusers who committed other crimes committed those crimes prior to the animal offense.

**SEQUENCE OF ANIMAL ABUSE
AND OTHER ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

	VIOLENCE	OTHER CRIMES	TOTAL
ABUSE PRECEDES	24	19	43 (41%)
ABUSE FOLLOWS	33	30	63 (59%)

Part Two of the study indicates that rather than being a causal predictor of other crime or a distinct step in the development of increasingly criminal or violent behavior, animal abuse is one among many anti-social behaviors exhibited by individuals.

Part Three

Secondary Victimization

In an effort to determine how cruelty to animals affects the animals' owners, two groups of owners were interviewed: a group whose animals were abused by neighbors or strangers, and a group whose animals were abused by domestic partners. Although subjects in the first group filed cruelty complaints and those in the second group did not, all of the owners interviewed reported feeling victimized, even though they were not the direct targets of physical assault. This reaction, like that reported by actual victims of crime, involved three stages.

Acute Crisis Owners' initial reactions to learning that their animals had been abused included shock, disbelief, and rage. One of the pet owners likened her reaction to post-traumatic stress syndrome, saying "I couldn't laugh, couldn't cry.....I was totally shut down." Owners who did not know their animals' abusers often found themselves facing what seemed like an impossible situation to believe, especially because of the apparent senselessness and randomness of the crimes. While owners of animals abused by domestic partners were also clearly disturbed by the abuse, they usually were not as shocked by it, seeing the cruelty as simply one more violent episode in what was often a long history of indiscriminate violence against people and

animals. One owner described her partner as having “no appreciation of animals having feelings...”

Not surprisingly, outrage was common in the acute crisis stage, in part because of feelings of helplessness. Frustration and disappointment with police response and court outcomes often compounded the anger. As one owner noted, “I think whenever somebody gets away with something and you’re the victim, it’s kind of a shock...”

Complicating the rage of owners whose pets were abused by domestic partners was the painful cycle of confronting abusers who denied responsibility, were forgiven, and then repeated the abuse.

Dealing With Emotions Animal abuse invariably took an emotional toll on the animals’ owners as they cared for pets that had sustained injuries and sometimes exhibited behavioral changes as a result of abuse. When abuse resulted in their pets’ death, the grief experienced by owners was often intensified by the fact that they could not be with their animals when they died, or by lingering images of how their pets died. In cases in which a domestic partner harmed or killed an animal, many owners also felt guilty because they did not prevent the abuse, even though most of these owners felt that they tried to protect their pets more than they did themselves. Another source of guilt for many of these individuals was the fact that they believed the abuse was really aimed at them. “He was using the dog to get at me,” said one woman. “He knew how much I loved him (the dog).”

Living After Abuse Like the victims of crime, owners of abused animals went on with their lives, although there were some long-term effects. Many reported a heightened sense of vulnerability, causing increased vigilance, security consciousness, and suspiciousness of others. One owner said, "What it's done is to create boundaries.....I work really hard to not let people get close to me until I really have a feeling that they are trustworthy."

As they resumed their lives after the abuse of their animals, owners often sought ways to see something good coming from it. Some attempted to prevent incidents of animal abuse in general. For owners whose pets were harmed by their partners, the animal abuse was sometimes seen as the catalyst for ending abusive relationships.

In general, the short and long-term responses of the pet owners interviewed in Part Three of the study parallel those in other cases of secondary victimization, as well as responses in many cases of primary victimization. Although most of these owners recovered from the initial crisis stage, a recurrent theme in the interviews was how the experience had caused lasting changes in their perceptions of the predictability and meaningfulness of life.

These findings enlarge our understanding of the impact of cruelty to animals, and underscore the importance of preventing these crimes and of intervening in animal abuse cases.

Conclusions

The findings of this study clearly indicate that crimes against animals must be taken seriously. First, these crimes need to be reported. It is estimated that nearly 17% of American adults have witnessed intentional cruelty to animals, but that only 40% of these witnesses reported the crime to authorities. Second, the criminal justice system needs to take strong action. The study showed that fewer than half of those charged with violent offenses against animals even get to the point of a court verdict. Third, penalties need to be stiffer. Animal abuse convictions rarely lead to jail time, and fines are minimal. Fourth, crimes against animals should be classified and tracked as violent crimes and not merely misdemeanors. Fifth, the needs of the secondary victims of animal abuse--the animals' owners--need to be recognized and responded to. And finally, this research should serve as a wake-up call for parents, teachers, social service providers, law enforcement, the judiciary, veterinarians--indeed, for all of us--that cruelty to animals is a warning sign that deserves our attention and demands intervention.

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RESOURCES

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The Humane Society of the United States
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