

Family & Intimate Partner Violence

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Form of Emotional Blackmail: Animal Abuse as a Risk Factor for Domestic Violence

by Phil Arkow*

Editor's Note: Author Phil Arkow illuminates readers about a particularly abhorrent manifestation of abusive dynamics operating in many families: the batterer's abuse of the family pets. As he points out, women are the primary caretakers of domestic animals (as well as of children), so when a batterer threatens to harm a beloved pet, he is sending a very clear message about his intentions towards the rest of the family as far as his violent intentions. Advocates and others providing support for DV victims urgently need to understand this especially sinister form of intimate partner violence.

The traditional approach to domestic violence by advocates and law enforcement agencies focuses solely on the interrelationships of the human residents of the household. However, law reform and public policy are now addressing the significant presence and emotional impact of companion animals as important, albeit non-human, "members of the family." The depth of attachments to these pets, particularly among women and children in homes marked by domestic violence and child abuse, frequently enables batterers to target animals with threatened or actual cruelty as a form of emotional blackmail to gain additional power and control. This article will describe current research, recent laws, and novel responses that address the links between animal abuse and domestic violence.

Market research reveals that 99% of Americans consider pets to be either family members (63.2%) or companions (35.8%), that pets are most preva-

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lent in homes with children, and that women overwhelmingly serve as the primary caregivers to these animals. Given these dynamics, it is not surprising that more than a dozen studies have reported that from 18% to 48% of women entering shelters delayed their escape due to concerns for the welfare of pets or even livestock left behind. The reluctance of these women to leave their pets has been determined to be even more problematic in rural areas where access to shelters and animal foster care services is more limited.

Animal abuse is pervasive in families characterized by domestic violence. As many as 71% of domestic violence survivors report that their partners killed, harmed or threatened animals as a means of demonstrating authority.

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These incidents of animal abuse frequently serve as an abuser's vivid demonstration or opaque intimation, with an inherent expressed or implied message that whatever was done to the animal would be

repeated against the human victim unless she complied with the abuser's demands. Incidents of animal abuse are invariably perpetrated in the physical presence of women and/or children. According to one study, 87% of the animal cruelties were committed in the presence of women, and 75% in the presence of children. Having women and children witness these acts serves to instill emotional damage, hold the entire family hostage, and extract revenge.

Animal abuse functions as an indicator of high lethality. Research has found that batterers who abuse pets are more dangerous than those who do not. In fact, pet-abusing batterers employ more controlling behaviors, sexual violence, marital rape, emotional violence, and stalking. Other studies have revealed that a history of threatened or actual pet abuse is one of the four most significant risk factors for becoming a domestic violence abuser. A study of calls into a municipal domestic violence crisis line determined that the three greatest risk factors for lethality were access to weapons, threats of suicide, and threats to mutilate or kill the family pets.

WHY ARE ANIMALS TARGETED?

Why do batterers so frequently target companion animals as a form of emotional blackmail? Several reasons explain the behavior. Most simply, they do it because they can, because the animals are convenient, and because the tactic works. In homes marked by multiple concurrent forms of abusive behaviors, assaults on those perceived to be less worthy become a household norm and part of the culture of power and control. Whether the victim has two legs or four is often as much a matter of opportunity as of planned intention. However, some abusers have reported that they attacked pets, specifically, because they believed such incidents would be less likely to draw the interest of law enforcement agencies.

A recent study by Michael Roguski of the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals explored the reasons why animals are targeted so frequently during abusive relationships. Roguski reported that animal abuse serves to normalize a culture of violence through the abuser's perverse satisfaction of hurting an animal as a means of instilling fear. Orchestrated punishment upon a proxy for what is perceived to be another family member's unsatisfactory behavior demonstrates intolerance for rules being broken. Batterers also take their rage out on animals in their resentment as a jealous perception that their partners give more emotional attention to their pets than to them. The batterers' rage may be expressed as bestiality, with survivors forced to engage in sexual activity with animals, or as pornographic activity, with survivors forced to watch animal pornography as a further means of the batterer's expressions of dominance.

A previously unreported dynamic, according to the Roguski study, is that widespread abuse of animals occurs even after the intimate relationship has ended. Threatened or actual animal abuse serves to punish the survivor for leaving. Such threatened or actual animal abuse functions to enhance the survivor's anxiety to such an extent that increasing numbers of battered women return to their abusers. Batterers also may carry out such incidents of animal abuse against animals belonging to those family members or friends who aided and abetted the survivor's escape.

HOW IS ANIMAL ABUSE MANIFESTED?

The abuse of animals as a form of emotional blackmail to coerce and control domestic violence survivors takes many insidious forms. In addition to threats, punishment, and deprivation of food or veterinary care, pets may "disappear" as a way to send the human victim a silent message that the abuser is in control. Animals also often become unwitting pawns in custody disputes.

The various forms of animal abuse are incorporated in a version of the Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel featured in the previous issue of FIPV (Vol 6, No. 4) that was adapted by Safe Passage, an agency serving domestic violence survivors in Northampton, Mass. These forms include:

- **Coercion and Threats.** Threatening to harm or kill your pet if you leave or assert any independence.
- **Emotional Abuse.** Calling your pet names, or giving away or killing a pet to take away your primary source of comfort and unconditional love.
- **Intimidation.** Harming or killing a pet and threatening that the same thing will happen to you if you don't comply with the abuser's demands.
- **Minimizing, Denying, and Blaming.** Blaming your or the pet's behavior as necessitating the abuser's cruelty. Killing a pet and then saying that it doesn't matter because the pet was old.

- **Legal Abuse.** Trying to take possession of a pet for which you have been the primary caretaker. Filing charges of pet theft against you if you leave with the pet.
- **Isolation.** Refusing to allow you to take your pet to your vet. Prohibiting you from allowing your dog to socialize with other dogs.
- **Economic Abuse.** Refusing to allow you to spend money on adequate pet food and/or vet care (then blaming you when the neglect is noticed by authorities).
- **Using Children.** Harming or killing the children's pet to intimidate them. Blaming the "disappearance" of the family pet on you to create a wedge between you and the children.

POLICY AND PROGRAM RESPONSES

In the last two decades, law reform and public policy have addressed this form of domestic violence. Response to this issue has been multi-faceted, involving unique linkages between human and humane services agencies, state legislators, and national organizations. These measures include:

- **Pet Safekeeping Programs.** The need to provide pet safekeeping support for families facing domestic violence has been increasingly recognized. Many shelters offer safe housing services for pets; however, the supply is far less than the demand for such services. A study by the Ohio Domestic Violence Network reported that 79% of responding shelters see this as a critical issue. Unfortunately, however, only 14% of the responding shelters offered safe housing services for pets and only 25% routinely included information about pet safety in their written materials. On the national level, it is unknown how many shelters provide safe housing services for pets, although estimates range as high as 900 women's shelters that have instituted "safe haven" referral programs. In such programs, pets of domestic violence survivors may be given short- or long-term foster care by humane societies, SPCAs, animal control, breed rescue, veterinary, or other community groups. More recently, some 86 domestic violence shelters in the U.S., plus two in Canada and Australia, have initiated "SAF-T"—
- **Sheltering Animals and Families Together.** These latter programs construct animal housing facilities at domestic violence shelters in order to keep the integrity of the entire family fleeing abuse intact. Grants are available to shelters to construct pet facilities at www.redrover.org. A directory of pet safekeeping programs is available at www.safeplaceforpets.org.
- **Redefinitions of Domestic Violence.** State legislatures are designating "animal abuse" in state statutory definitions of domestic

violence. For example, seven states (Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, and Tennessee) have amended their statutory definitions of domestic violence to include acts of cruelty, abuse or neglect against animals that are intended to coerce, control, punish, intimidate, terrorize, exact revenge, or commit other emotional harm upon an intimate partner. Colorado has added a similar provision to its definition of elder abuse.

- **Pet Protection Orders.** State legislatures also are enacting protection order statutes that include animals as eligible victims. Currently, 27 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia have enacted statutory authority specifically granting courts the power to include companion animals and/or livestock in domestic violence orders of protection. After Minnesota introduced such provisions in 2010, courts in that state issued 3,128 pet protection orders in the next three years.
- **Community Partnerships.** Because these issues are multidisciplinary, the National Link Coalition is encouraging the formation of community task forces addressing crossover issues between domestic violence and animal abuse. Dozens of models of linkages between community domestic violence and animal protection agencies have been initiated. These programs take the form of: statewide and local coalitions; inclusion of animal care and control agencies in multi-disciplinary teams; collaborative fundraisers for women's and animal shelters; identification of pet-friendly transitional housing; therapy animal visits to domestic violence shelters; low-cost pet food, veterinary, and spay/neuter services; emergency pet sheltering; cross-reporting protocols; and other innovative ideas. One of the newest such collaborative programs is the Spot Abuse campaign in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, (www.spotabuse.org) where highly graphic photos of abused children, women, and animals are prompting residents to call 911 to report animal abuse as a way to prevent domestic violence.
- **Animal Abuse as a Means of Disclosure.** Legislation that mandates cross-reporting among agencies can help address serious gaps in services. Social service and domestic violence agencies often do not routinely screen for animal abuse. This is unfortunate because victims and victimizers may be more likely to disclose incidents of animal abuse than to disclose acts of interpersonal aggression. Initiating client intakes, interviews and assessments with questions about the presence and welfare of household animals provides a safe, neutral, less threatening inquiry process, opens up channels of communication, and becomes an excellent opportunity to build trust and establish rapport with a client who is under stress. Such

disclosures can also reveal the need for referrals to animal protection agencies.

- **Safety Planning.** Another programmatic response—and one that is remarkably simple to put in place—is to routinely include pets in safety planning. Domestic violence agencies are including simple guides on how to prepare pets for rapid exits from batterers among the other instructions presented in safety planning brochures. These measures including taking steps to make sure all pet care documentation—licenses, microchips, vaccinations, veterinary bills, registration papers, receipts, etc.—are in the survivor’s name so as to avoid complicated custody disputes.
- **Supported Training.** Many organizations are also providing training on these linkages for first and second responders. National and state coalitions against domestic violence and local domestic violence agencies, have been particularly active in providing training to their constituencies about the links between animal abuse and intimate partner violence. Physicians are also receiving such training in Connecticut where state law mandates that Continuing Medical Education include topics regarding domestic violence. The National Link Coalition widely offers trainings to domestic violence audiences.
- **Psychological Assessments and Counseling.** Because animal cruelty is a highly specialized crime, new methods of assessment and treatment of offenders need to be developed. More than 31 states have enacted provisions permitting or mandating psychological assessments or counseling for individuals convicted of animal cruelty. Such programs, conducted by trained therapists, can be integrated with batterer intervention and counseling protocols to address the elements common to both crimes.

Additional information about the above programs is available from the National Link Coalition, www.nationallinkcoalition.org.

CONCLUSION

The linkage between animal abuse and intimate partner violence has now earned increased professional and public attention. Individuals who work with perpetrators and survivors (such as those in law enforcement, criminal justice, domestic violence prevention, and other agencies) must recognize the sentinel significance of acts of animal abuse as ominous portents of dangerous aggression. To do so, efforts must focus on improved screening. Such information gathering, which can be highly revealing, gains valuable, systematic data about the presence or absence of animals in the household and the levels of care and attachment demonstrated to them by victimizers and victims. Possible questions may include pet ownership histories, animals serving as a

source of emotional support, history of pet loss, incidence of cruelty or killing of animals, use of animals to control or coerce a person, sexual interactions with animals, and animal-related phobias.

Research clearly demonstrates that when intimate partner violence exists, often everyone in the household is at risk, including humans and animals. Cruelty to animals can no longer be trivialized or seen as an isolated crime. Rather, it must be viewed, first, as a form of emotional blackmail and, second, as a risk factor for domestic violence aggression and lethality.

Awareness of animal abuse should facilitate the survivor's exit and should be included in danger assessment tools. Animal abuse may also serve as a wake-up call to a domestic violence survivor: if the abuser is presently hurting animals, she will be next. While survivors frequently blame themselves and excuse their abusers' actions, they may find it harder to ignore acts of violence directed against innocent animals. Animal cruelty is a vivid demonstration that the fault lies not within the survivor, but in the personality of the abuser.

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Our emotional attachments to others are often at their most intense during times of crisis. And, during times of crisis, pets play an important role. Examples abound of individuals refusing to leave natural disaster areas unless provisions are made for the simultaneous evacuation of their pets. These are vivid testimony to the power of the bonds between people and their companion animals. Particularly during the turbulence of relationship breakdowns and domestic violence, pets may be significant sources of consolation and social support for survivors.

The origins and manifestations of intimate partner violence are exceedingly complex, with an accumulation of risk factors. Authorities on the "Link" between animal abuse and human violence do not imply that animals are more important than people. They believe that when animals are abused, people are at risk, and vice versa. No forms of family violence should be tolerated. As a result, agencies involving in domestic violence, animal welfare, child maltreatment, and elder abuse should collaborate to reduce family violence in its many forms. Today, public support for a strong and rapid response to animal abuse and its associations with family violence continues to grow, resulting in more comprehensive and preventive approaches that protect all vulnerable members of families.