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# The Role of Veterinary Forensics in Animal Cruelty Investigations



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against anthropomorphized species (dogs and cats) in an up-close manner.<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1997, Luke Woodham, a high school student in a suburb of Jackson, Mississippi, killed two girls and wounded seven other students with a hunting rifle. He also stabbed and bludgeoned his mother to death earlier that morning. Woodham's journal included a description of his and an accomplice's torturing and killing of the family dog "Sparkle." He wrote about beating her inside a plastic bag and setting it on fire. He referred to this incident as his "first kill"; he wrote "I will never forget the howl she made. It sounded almost human. We laughed and hit her hard."<sup>2</sup>

On May 21, 1998, 15-year-old Kip Kinkel shot his parents to death and emptied three firearms at his fellow Thurston High School classmates in Springfield, Oregon, leaving 1 student dead and 26 others injured. His earlier attacks on animals also illustrated an up-close and personal variety of animal abuse; he allegedly decapitated cats, dissected live squirrels, blew up cows, set a live cat on fire, and put firecrackers in gophers and cats.<sup>3</sup> Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston strangler"), David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam"), and Jeffrey Dahmer all reported animal torture as their first acts of violence, as well.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, animal cruelty can come before, coincide with, or follow many antisocial behaviors, including interpersonal violence. Rather than the graduation or escalation hypothesis, which proposes that animal cruelty precedes subsequent acts of human violence, a more accurate description of animal abuse may be that of generalized deviance. Data suggests that sadistic serial killers abuse animals at a rate of close

**V**eterinary forensics is a developing field that can assist with animal cruelty investigations. Animal abuse investigations are vital because animal maltreatment is a co-occurring and central aspect of interpersonal violence. Animal care professionals, such as veterinarians, animal control officers, and humane law enforcement all have roles to play in the prevention, identification, and treatment of interpersonal violence. The co-occurrence of child abuse and domestic violence with animal abuse, and the significance of childhood animal abuse means that animal welfare overlaps with

both family welfare and public safety. Veterinarians with training in veterinary forensics can be especially valuable to animal cruelty investigations.

## **Animal Torture: Predictor of Extreme Violence**

Animal cruelty, including animal torture and killing, is often associated with violence involving people and sometimes is a precursor event. In the instance of school shootings, 43 percent of the perpetrators committed animal cruelty before massacres, and the cruelty was usually directed

to 90 percent when all kinds of animal abuse, including negligence, are considered.<sup>5</sup> Perpetrators of mass shootings frequently have both domestic violence and animal abuse in their histories.

School shooters and sadistic serial killers seem to share the drive to have power and exercise control over the lives of others, deciding who dies and who lives. In these crimes, the perpetrators get to be the ones who regulate the degree of pain and suffering experienced by their victims. Some cases of animal cruelty and human-oriented violence are similarly motivated: compensating for the perpetrator's feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability by imparting a sense of strength and superiority.<sup>6</sup>

### The Link

The connection between violence to people and animals is not only found in extreme examples such as mass killings. Domestic violence is also associated with violence to animals—threats to pets or actual harm to pets are sometimes used to control domestic violence victims.<sup>7</sup> This association between social violence, particularly domestic violence, and animal cruelty is commonly referred to as “The Link.”

In one study of women in a domestic violence shelter, 71 percent of pet-owning women reported that their partners had threatened to kill or had actually killed their pets.<sup>8</sup> Women in shelters were 11 times more likely to report that their partner had hurt

or killed a pet than those in the comparison group.<sup>9</sup> Batterers who abuse pets also demonstrate a greater incidence of controlling behaviors including sexual violence, marital rape, emotional abuse, and stalking.<sup>10</sup>

Youth participation in animal cruelty is a significant marker for the development of aggressive behavior.<sup>11</sup> Among juveniles who were referred to an arson intervention group, those who were cruel to animals were more likely to repeat fire setting.<sup>12</sup>

Abusers exercising power and control over any vulnerable being through violence and intimidation flag themselves as violent threats; therefore, effective policing includes aggressively pursuing crimes against animals.

### Animal Cruelty Laws and Prosecutions

In the United States, felony provisions for animal cruelty offenses exist in all 50 states. There are 32 states (and Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico) that permit pet protection orders for domestic violence victims, and 35 states have statutes that either permit or mandate veterinarians to report suspicions of animal maltreatment.<sup>13</sup>

In a recent survey, prosecutors were asked to list the types of animal cruelty cases they have prosecuted in the last five years. Of the respondents, 85 percent have prosecuted cases of criminal neglect or animal hoarding; almost 79 percent have prosecuted cases of intentional abuse or torture;

nearly 31 percent have prosecuted cases of organized animal abuse or animal fighting; and 21 percent have prosecuted cases of animal sexual abuse. Of those cases, nearly 82 percent were accompanied by other criminal charges, including (in order of frequency) intimate partner abuse, assault, child or elder abuse, drugs, weapons, gambling, and gang-related crime, as well as other crimes such as arson, burglary, and theft.<sup>14</sup>

### Change in NIBRS Status: Crime Against Society

Reflecting the current understanding of animal cruelty's association with other crimes, in 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) added a separate category of animal cruelty to Group A of the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). The FBI's adoption of animal cruelty crime as a separate category in NIBRS acknowledges that animal maltreatment is linked to other offenses.

Additionally, animal cruelty is now designated as a Crime Against Society, rather than a Crime Against Persons, or a Crime Against Property; this change implies the FBI's adoption of the concept that nonhuman animals are in a category other than that of property and that animal cruelty crimes are important to investigate and to charge. NIBRS has four subcategories for incidents of animal cruelty: A—simple abuse or neglect, I—intentional abuse or torture, O—organized animal abuse or fighting, and S—animal sexual abuse.

## CASE STUDY

“Coco” McCarriston was a 7-year-old, 11-pound female Maltese dog found dead in the family garage in Marblehead, Massachusetts. The family brought the dog to their veterinarian for cremation. The veterinarian, being a mandated reporter for suspicions of cases of animal cruelty, reported her concerns about the cause of the animal's death to local law enforcement.

The body was submitted to a forensic veterinarian for postmortem examination. The body was examined externally, shaved of fur, radiographed (x-rayed), and examined internally. When the fur was shaved, two pairs of linear contusions were discovered; these bruises are consistent with blunt force trauma with a long implement such as a board or a bat. The skull was crushed, the head received lacerations from bone fragments, and the teeth had fresh chips in them (see Figures 1 and 2).

Andrew's family told the veterinarian that he had killed the dog, but did not report it to the police even though Andrew's mother is alleged to have asked “Should I be afraid of my son?” prior to Coco's killing. However, as a mandatory reporter, the veterinarian did report the information to authorities.

When faced with the evidence from the postmortem examination, 18-year-old Andrew McCarriston admitted that, while he was alone with the dog, he bludgeoned it to death with three blows from a baseball bat.

Andrew McCarriston was sentenced to five years of probation, which included mandatory residential mental health treatment. Should he leave the residential program against medical advice, he will be deemed in violation of probation and subject to incarceration for the remainder of his term.

**Note:** Information and photos provided by author.

Figure 1

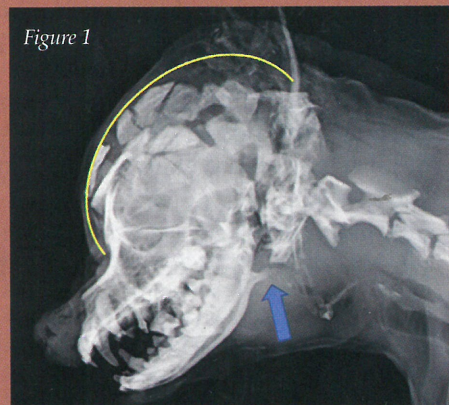
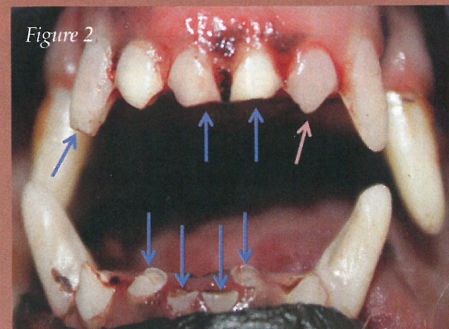


Figure 2



The National Coalition on Violence Against Animals developed the *NIBRS User Manual for Animal Control Officers (ACOs) and Humane Law Enforcement Officers (HLE)* to ensure ACOs and HLE officers are aware of and fully equipped for their new and critical role in reporting animal cruelty incidents to the FBI.<sup>15</sup> ACOs are generally employed by municipalities while HLE officers are employed by private animal welfare organizations. HLE officers may have peace officer rights and responsibilities through a contract, memorandum of understanding (MOU), or other arrangement. In many cases, ACOs and HLE officers lack access to the records management software system necessary to submit data directly to NIBRS and will in fact also require an MOU with any agency who can provide that resource.

### Animal Cruelty Investigations in the Vortex

Despite the increased understanding of their importance, animal cruelty investigations can sometimes be a crime that occupies an "other" space, even falling through the cracks. This might be due in part to the variety of agencies or authorities that may respond to these calls and a failure to understand the roles of other agencies. Law enforcement, animal control, town animal inspectors, the department of agriculture, and nonprofit organizations with police powers have a variety of rights and responsibilities with regard to allegations of animal maltreatment, depending on individual jurisdictions. Because of a lack of clarity in reporting and response responsibilities, animal victims sometimes do not benefit from an investigation, and their abusers might not be brought to justice. There is no single uniform, reliable way to report animal cruelty and know that the case will be fully and appropriately investigated.

It is estimated that approximately half of animal control offices are located within the jurisdiction of a police department or a sheriff's office. With the various placements of the animal control agencies, the training, investigatory, and arrest powers of ACOs also vary widely within and across states. A more standardized approach would facilitate dispatch; align the animal control officer with law enforcement, providing training and support services as well as more efficient backup when needed; and help the public know whom and where to call for services.

### "Broken Animals Policing"

Laws against animal cruelty are important to enforce because of the crime's relationship to interpersonal violence and because violence toward animals is a criminal act on its own merit. Directing resources to crimes of violence, whether against people or animals, may have an interrupting effect that is more effective than a focus

on petty or property crime. In addition to locating animal control within the public safety department, police officers and detectives should be appropriately trained in the recognition and documentation of crimes against animals—and they should have sufficient resources to enforce animal cruelty laws.

### The NYC Example

Animal cruelty investigations are often delegated to ACOs with little training or resources or to private nonprofit organizations with small departments of HLE officers. Increasingly, local police departments are investing more in the investigation of allegations of animal maltreatment. The rewards of apprehending an animal abuser may be that the abuser is also interrupted from engaging in other illegal activities.

When animal cruelty investigations are siloed away from law enforcement, the opportunity for comprehensive engagement with a scene or suspects is lost. The best departments are working collaboratively with available resources such as veterinarians; ACOs; animal behavior experts; the federal, state, or local Department of Agriculture; and humane agents from animal welfare organizations to better understand what animal cruelty looks like and what is appropriate evidence to collect.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in New York City elected to get out of the business of law enforcement, choosing to instead train the New York Police Department on the specifics of animal cruelty investigations. Currently, the ASPCA provides case support through the provision of veterinary forensics support and live animal evidence housing for the duration of legal action.

### The Veterinarians' Role

Veterinarians have been referred to as "the other family doctor" by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).<sup>16</sup> There is a movement among international health organizations, veterinary associations, environmental organizations and others to recognize "one health," the concept that the wellness of the environment, people, and animals are inexorably intertwined. The one health approach considers environmental health and environmental interventions as central to addressing emerging infectious disease threats.<sup>17</sup> Because the one health movement is centered on infectious disease risks, the terms "one welfare" and "one safety" have also been used to imply or include the threats or effects of violent actions.<sup>18</sup> The AVMA website provides a manual, available for download, to help veterinarians more easily and confidently report suspected animal cruelty.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the National Link Coalition maintains a directory of where to report abuse.<sup>20</sup>

A study on battered pets examined veterinary records for more than 400 cats and dogs in the United Kingdom for which veterinarians suspected non-accidental injury. The study revealed a wide range of injuries including bruises, fractures, repetitive injuries, scalds and burns, stab and incise wounds, asphyxiation, poisoning, and drowning—a list with notable similarities to common non-accidental injuries (NAI) in children, as well as sexual abuse and injuries specifically caused by firearms. Skeletal traumas in the dogs were more commonly found in the skeleton's anterior (toward the front of the animal), unlike those resulting from road traffic accidents. Young cats and young male dogs were particularly at risk of NAI.<sup>21</sup>

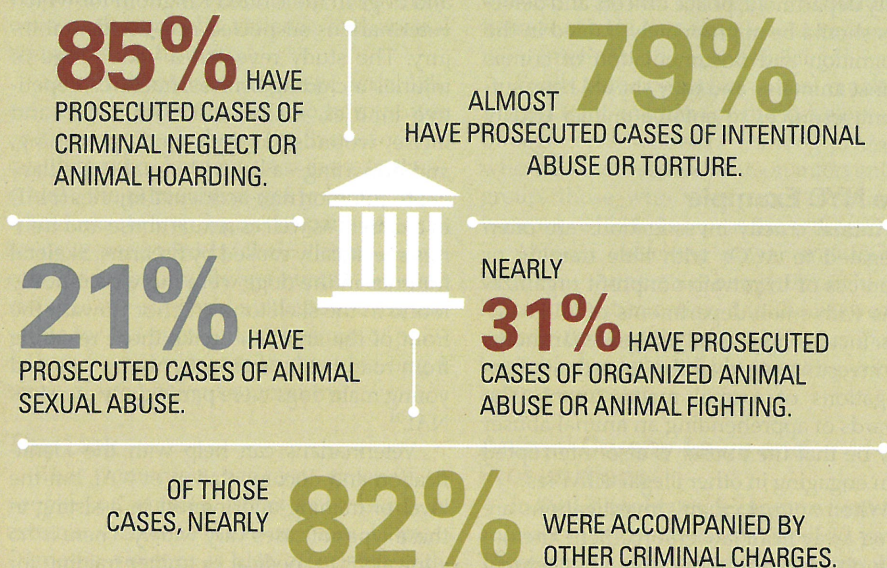
Veterinarians can help with the identification and documentation of NAI, but the level of training and interest in assisting in these types of cases vary widely. There is no equivalent to medical examiner training for veterinarians, and not one U.S. state offers coroner or medical examiner services for animals. For this reason, animals that are found dead in the United States are discarded more often than they are examined, which means that potentially important cases go uninvestigated. When one considers that harmed animals are the canary in the coal mine for violent behavior, this failure means that a perpetrator of crimes of general deviance may go undetected.

### Veterinary Forensic Scientists

Forensic veterinarians and veterinary forensic scientists (non-veterinarians) may be involved any time an objective, scientific analysis is needed to find the truth and to seek justice in a legal proceeding involving an animal. Forensic investigations are objective and unbiased; results can be utilized in both criminal and civil cases. Veterinary forensic science can be applied for the good of society; public safety; and animal health, welfare, and safety.

In the survey previously referenced, prosecutors reported that information from an animal that influenced a decision to prosecute a case of animal cruelty included documentation of the animal's condition in a veterinary medical record, pictures of the animal taken during a veterinary forensic exam, documentation of the animal's recovery and return to a healthy condition, the animal's behavior, diagnostic tests, scar or wound charts, radiographs (x-rays), the normal values expected in diagnostic tests, or the dental exam. Other evidence that influenced the decision to prosecute included the investigator's report; eyewitness reports; a veterinary report; defendant statement or confession; owner statements; neighbor statements; expert witness testimony; statement, behavior, or identity of a person at a veterinary office; social media posts; 911

In a recent survey, prosecutors were asked to list the types of animal cruelty cases they have prosecuted in the last five years.



calls; cellphone calls or texts; jail calls; and phone or financial records.<sup>22</sup>

Most cases of suspected animal maltreatment involve veterinary examination of a live or deceased animal or animals. In other cases, the forensic veterinary examiner may assist by attending the scene to participate in on-site investigation, gather evidence, or document facts for later analysis. To join in the execution of a search warrant, the veterinarian or veterinary forensic scientist should be written into the search warrant.

Whether they are provided with information or have personally gathered the relevant information, the forensic scientists then must decide which examinations, tests, or analyses are appropriate and relevant to the issues in dispute. (Are those marks evidence of an animal trying to escape? Did natural disease or an accident cause the findings?) The most important aspects of veterinary reports are the photographic evidence, comments on pain or suffering, determination of the cause of harm or death, and a determination of the duration of any neglect or illness.

### Veterinary Forensics in the Field

Very few employers hire full-time forensic veterinarians, forensic veterinary technicians, or other types of forensic scientists. The ASPCA has a handful of veterinarians and other forensic specialists who work in New York City and respond to large-scale cases across the United States involving hundreds of animals (e.g., animal hoarding, animal fighting). Some veterinary schools have veterinary pathologists on faculty with an interest in veterinary forensics. Confoundingly though, some veterinary pathology laboratories will refuse cases with any forensic

questions to be answered, citing a lack of sufficient staff to be available for court proceedings. The International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association is one resource that may be able to help with referrals to a veterinary forensic scientist.<sup>23</sup>

Most frequently, veterinary forensics is a part-time pursuit of a veterinarian employed in a municipal or private animal shelter, especially a facility with a humane law enforcement function. A few veterinarians have established veterinary forensics consulting businesses, but most will tell you that they do not make a living through veterinary forensics consulting alone.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and some state governments employ wildlife forensic scientists. Poaching violations, the development of state and federal hunting regulations, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) are some of the factors that guide wildlife forensics.

### Summary

The association between crimes of violence against people and animals provides an avenue to identifying violent actors in communities. Abusers exercising power and control over any vulnerable being through violence and intimidation are flagging themselves as threats. Allegations of animal cruelty are not always fully investigated by the police due to confusing or conflicting information on where to report and who has jurisdiction. Violence is not limited to crimes against people, and it does not have any single socioeconomic niche. Effective policing includes aggressively pursuing crimes against animals.

When a person dies in questioned circumstances, his or her body will be thoroughly examined by a medical examiner whose services are supplied by the state or other governmental office. When it comes to investigating the death of or harm to animals in questioned circumstances, there is no equivalent office to turn to for investigative support. Veterinarians contributing to the investigation of allegations of animal cruelty help to protect both animal welfare and human safety. ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Arnold Arluke and Eric Madfis, "Animal Abuse as a Warning Sign of School Massacres," *Homicide Studies* 18, no.1 (2014): 7–22.

<sup>2</sup>Kevin Sack, "Grim Details Emerge in Teen-Age Slaying Case," *New York Times*, October 15, 1997.

<sup>3</sup>Suzanne E. Tallichet and Christopher Hensley, "Exploring the Link between Recurrent Acts of Childhood and Adolescent Animal Cruelty and Subsequent Violent Crime," *Criminal Justice Review* 29, no. 2 (2004): 304–316.

<sup>4</sup>Gail F. Melson, "Do Mass Killers Start Out by Harming Pets?" *Psychology Today* (blog), February 20, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/why-the-wild-things-are/201302/do-mass-killers-start-out-harming-pets>.

<sup>5</sup>Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, "Refining the Link between Animal Abuse and Subsequent Violence," in *The Link between Animal Abuse and Violence*, ed. Andrew Linzey (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup>Stephen R. Kellert and Alan R. Felthous, "Childhood Cruelty toward Animals among Criminals and Noncriminals," *Human Relations* 38, no. 12 (1985): 1113–1129.

<sup>7</sup>Lenore E. Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 1984).

<sup>8</sup>Frank R. Ascione, "Battered Women's Reports of Their Partners' and Their Children's Cruelty to Animals," *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1, no. 1 (1998): 119–133.

<sup>9</sup>Frank R. Ascione et al., "Battered Pets and Domestic Violence: Animal Abuse Reported by Women Experiencing Intimate Violence and by Non-abused Women," *Violence Against Women* 13 (2007): 354–373.

<sup>10</sup>Catherine A. Simmons and Peter Lehmann, "Exploring the Link between Pet Abuse and Controlling Behaviors in Violent Relationships," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 22, no. 9 (2007): 1211–1222.

<sup>11</sup>Linda Merz-Perez, Kathleen M. Heide, and Ira J. Silverman, "Childhood Cruelty to Animals and Subsequent Violence against Animals," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 45, no. 5 (2001): 556–573.

<sup>12</sup>Michael L. Slavkin, "Enuresis, Firesetting, and Cruelty to Animals: Does the Ego Triad Show Predictive Validity?" *Adolescence* 36, no. 143 (Fall 2001): 461–466.

<sup>13</sup>Rebecca F. Wisch, "Domestic Violence and Pets: List of States that Include Pets in Protection Orders," Michigan State University College of Law, Animal Legal & Historical Center, 2017, <https://www.animallaw.info/article/domestic-violence-and-pets-list-states-include-pets-protection-orders>; Stacy Wolf "Raising Awareness About the Link: Link Cited as Key in Advancing Legal Protections for Animals," *The LINK-Letter* 10, no. 6 (June 2017): 13–14, <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/LinkLetter-2017-June.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup>Randall Lockwood, "What Prosecutors Need for Successful Prosecution of Animal Cruelty: Results of a Survey" (lecture, 7th Annual Prosecuting Animal Cruelty Conference, Portland, OR, November 16, 2017).

<sup>15</sup>Daniel DeSousa et al., *NIBRS User Manual for Animal Control Officers and Humane Law Enforcement* (National Council on Violence Against Animals, 2016), <https://awionline.org/sites/default/files/products/AWI-CA-NIBRS-Manual.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup>Phil Arkow, Paula Boyden, and Emily Patterson-Kane, *Practical Guidance for the Effective Response by Veterinarians to Suspected Animal Cruelty, Abuse and Neglect* (Schaumburg, IL: American Veterinary Medical Association, 2011), <https://ebusiness.avma.org/Files/ProductDownloads/AVMA%20Suspected%20Animal%20Cruelty.pdf>.

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<sup>17</sup>Lisa A. Conti and Peter M. Rabinowitz "One Health Initiative," *Infektološki Glasnik* 31, no. 4 (2011): 176-178.

<sup>18</sup>Tyler Jordan and Michelle Lem, "One Health, One Welfare: Education in Practice Veterinary Students' Experiences with Community Veterinary Outreach," *The Canadian Veterinary Journal* 55, no. 12 (December 2014): 1203–1206; Martha Smith-Blackmore, "Do YOU Wear the Badge?" LinkedIn post, August 9, 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/do-you-wear-badge-martha-smith-blackmore-dvm?published=t>.

<sup>19</sup>Arkow, Boyden, and Patterson-Kane, *Practical Guidance for the Effective Response by Veterinarians to Suspected Animal Cruelty*.

<sup>20</sup>Helen M.C. Munro and Michael V. Thrusfield, "Battered Pets: Non-accidental Physical Injuries Found in Dogs and Cats," *Journal of Small Animal Practice* 42 (2001): 279–290.

<sup>21</sup>Lockwood, *What Prosecutors Need for Successful Prosecution of Animal Cruelty*.

<sup>22</sup>International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association, [www.ivfssa.org](http://www.ivfssa.org).

<sup>23</sup>The National Link Coalition, "How Do I Report Suspected Abuse?" <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/how-do-i-report-suspected-abuse>.

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