

THE ABUSE OF ANIMALS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:
A NATIONAL SURVEY OF SHELTERS
FOR WOMEN WHO ARE BATTERED

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This short article discusses the results from a national survey examining the experience of women who have been abused and the abuse perpetrated against their animals.

Prior to this research project, earlier data suggest that the abuse of animals is common in families where there is domestic violence. One study in Colorado Springs found that 24% of the women reported that their abuser's had abused animals in the women's presence, while another study found that 74% of women in a battered women's shelter reported having a pet, and of these 71% reported that their abuser had also abused the animal. (This variance may in part be accounted for by the fact that the Colorado Spring study did not ask women who had pets, but was for all the women in the program.) An additional result of the second study was that 32% of the women reported that their children had hurt or killed animals.

The current study was an attempt to get a national scope of the problem and explore how shelters responded. The authors developed a survey asking questions about the prevalence of animal abuse, the kinds of screening that shelters provide, and the services shelters offered to women who reports animal abuse. Using the directory of domestic violence programs provided by National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the authors identified the 50 largest shelters in the country (including the District of Columbia, but excluding Utah where a current study was already occurring) to participate in the survey. The specifically targeted shelters which provided overnight housing and children's services to participate in the study.

What they found was that 85% of the women and 63% of the children who came to these shelters spontaneously disclosed incidents of pet abuse in their homes. 83% of the shelters self-reported observing a coexistence between domestic violence and animal abuse. In spite of these findings, only 27% of the shelters screen for pet abuse during the intake process.

Some of the kinds of questions that were used as part of the screening include:

- Has he threatened to hurt you, your family, your pets, or favorite belongings of yours?
- Has the abuser threatened to harm or ever harmed a pet in the household?
- Do you have animals at home? Are they safe?
- Has there been physical destruction of property/pets? Where are the pets? Do you have a safe place for them?

These findings are telling in and of themselves. They also must be understood within their context. The survey was of the 50 largest shelters – suggesting that they exist in more urban

areas. Shelters in rural areas may have additional information about the co-existence and the extent of the coexistence between animal abuse and domestic violence. Other kinds of domestic violence programs may also have additional information about this coexistence.

This research suggests not only increased assessment in domestic violence programs (at least shelters) is warranted, but also that increased training of domestic violence staff on the issues of animal abuse. Animal advocacy agencies also are in need of training on the dynamics of domestic violence and the exposure to harm that this places animals. There is also much room for creative collaboration between domestic violence shelters and programs working to rescue animals from abuse.