



Training Key #392

Cruelty to Animals and Human Violence

Recent research in psychology and criminology has demonstrated that people who commit acts of cruelty against animals are often involved in crimes of violence against people. Investigations of complaints of animal cruelty have often unearthed other serious crimes, and therefore, should be taken seriously.

The 1989 execution of Theodore Bundy for one of as many as 50 murders he is believed to have committed renewed interest in the psychology of serial killers. During his eleventh hour confessions, Bundy claimed that he had spent his early years with a grandfather who assaulted people and tormented animals. Circumstantial evidence also linked Bundy to graves filled with animal bones found in Utah, with Bundy's name carved in a nearby tree.

For centuries, civilized societies have held the belief that people's treatment of animals is closely associated with their treatment of fellow human beings. The growth of the animal protection movement in the 19th century was part of a larger series of reforms to improve the treatment of women, children, the poor, and the mentally ill. In the United States and England, organizations for the protection of children grew out of animal protection groups. In fact, in 1874 a notorious child abuse case in New York was prosecuted by the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) under existing animal welfare laws.¹

Despite the widespread recognition of the link between cruelty to animals and other forms of violent or anti-social behavior, this connection has, until recently, largely been ignored by law enforcement agencies, the courts, social services agencies, and others in a position to take action. Enforcement of animal protection laws has traditionally been given a very low priority and prosecutions of such cases have rarely been pursued, even in the face of overwhelming violence.

Over the last decade, social scientists and law enforcement agencies have finally begun to examine cruelty to animals as a serious human problem closely

linked to child and spouse abuse and other violent crimes. Police departments around the United States have called upon local and national animal welfare groups to aid in the training of officers and to assist in the investigation and/or prosecution of animal cruelty cases. Several states have dramatically increased the penalties associated with violations of anti-cruelty laws and one, Wisconsin, has made the deliberate torture or sadistic killing of an animal a felony offense.² Some shocking animal cruelty cases have resulted in prison sentences of 10 years or more.

Several factors have prompted this new concern. First, there have been many dramatic case histories involving animal cruelty, similar to the Bundy case, that have attracted public and professional attention. Second, social scientists have been paying increasing attention to all forms of family violence, including abuse and neglect of children, spouses, and the elderly. Since pets are found in over half of all American homes and are frequently treated as family members, it is natural to assume that they may also become victims of family violence. Third, investigations of organized cruelty, such as dogfighting, have revealed that a multitude of other criminal offenses coexist with such activities. Finally, greater attention has been drawn to animal abuse by an increasingly concerned public and media that have been critical of mild punishments handed down in animal-cruelty cases.

Animal Cruelty and Adult Violence

Early interest in the link between cruelty to animals and criminality was inspired by anecdotal case histories of notorious criminals. There is compelling evidence linking both serial and mass murderers to

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acts of animal abuse prior to age 25. Noteworthy examples include:

- Albert DeSalvo, the self-confessed "Boston Strangler" who killed 13 women in 1962-63. In his youth he trapped dogs and cats in orange crates and shot arrows through the boxes.

- David Berkowitz, the "Son of Sam" gunman who shot a neighbor's Labrador retriever, claiming that it compelled him to kill.

- Carroll Edward Cole, executed in 1985 for five of 35 murders of which he was accused. He said that his first act of violence as a youth was the strangulation of a puppy.

- Patrick Sherrill, who in August 1986 killed 14 coworkers at a post office and then shot himself. Although he had no prior record of crimes against people, he had a history of stealing local pets and allowing his own dog to mutilate them.

Single case histories such as these do not provide much insight into the origins of animal abuse and its connections to other forms of violence. For this reason, a number of studies have examined larger populations of criminals to explore this association.

One survey of psychiatric patients who had repeatedly tortured dogs and cats found that all of the subjects had high levels of aggression against people, including one patient who had murdered a boy.³ These abusers shared a common history of brutal parental punishment, bullying, and other anti-social behavior.

One of the most detailed surveys of adult criminals was conducted by Felthous and Kellert.⁴ They looked at animal cruelty among three groups of men including aggressive criminals, nonaggressive criminals, and noncriminals. Ratings of aggressiveness were based on reports of the individuals' behavior in prison, rather than the crimes they had committed. Among the aggressive criminals, 25 percent reported five or more early acts of cruelty to animals, compared to six percent of the nonaggressive criminals and none of the sample of noncriminals. Aggressive criminals were also more likely to report fear of dislike of particular animals.

These studies have identified a triad of symptoms involving a close association between physical abuse by one or both parents, cruelty to animals, and violence toward people.

Animal Cruelty and Juvenile Justice

In 1987 three Missouri high school students were charged with the beating death of a classmate. The three had histories of anti-social acts and all had engaged in repeated acts of animal mutilation starting several years before the murder. One youth confessed that he had killed so many cats that he had lost count. Most violent offenders show signs of aggression as juveniles and often their first victims are animals. These animals abusers are almost always male,

usually 15 to 25 years of age, with a history of parental neglect, brutality, and rejection. Sometimes they find the company of one or more similarly inclined companions, such as a small group dabbling in Satanism or other cult practices.

Surprisingly, many of these youths report that they like animals. A University of Minnesota study of 507 delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents found that about 90 percent of both groups reported having had a "special pet" at some time in their lives. The delinquent children, however, were three times more likely to report that they sought out their pet during times of trouble and discussed their problems with it. Also, more than one-third of the delinquent youths had lost their special pet through intentional or accidental killing. In many cases an abusive parent had disposed of this loved animal as a way of attempting to hurt or control the child.⁵ One consequence of this can be that the child, in an attempt to convince himself and others that he is no longer vulnerable due to his affection for animals, becomes abusive.

Animal Cruelty and Family Violence

Most professionals agree that animal abuse is not just the result of a personality flaw in the abuser, but a symptom of a deeply disturbed family. Often families that come to the attention of human service agencies for having children at risk of abuse are also known to animal control or humane society agents in the same community because of problems of animal neglect or abuse. A 1983 survey of 57 pet-owning families under treatment by New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services because of child abuse revealed that, in 88 percent of the families, at least one person in the family had abused animals.⁶ In two-thirds of these cases it was the abusive parent that had killed or injured a pet, and children were the abusers in the remaining third. This and related studies confirm that cruelty to animals can be a sign of a family in need of professional help and/or law enforcement intervention.

It was noted earlier that the majority of perpetrators of animal cruelty are adolescent or young adult males. Although they come from the entire range of ethnic and financial backgrounds, what common thread starts these young boys on the road to animal cruelty, and their subsequent violence against people? Many are simply reflecting the violence they experience at home. Some are convinced of their "badness" by parents, and behave in the way that they think is expected of them. Others abuse animals to convince themselves that they don't care about the things they often seem to use. In cases where several youths participate, acts of violence against animals may serve as an initiation and a way of rejecting the values of society, as an attempt to shock or offend authority figures, or as retaliation against others.

Animal Abuse and Other Crimes

Animal cruelty has been correlated with other forms of adult wrongdoing. A recent study⁷ by Dr. Michael Bessey of the University of Manitoba concluded that "violators of wildlife laws may be involved in multitudinous illegal activities." He identified three clusters of offenses that seemed to go together. People who engaged in "unethical" acts such as aerial hunting were also likely to hunt endangered species, injure wildlife with snowmobiles, or illegally hunt game at night. Those who were guilty of "dangerous" acts typically violated laws related to firearm handling and public intoxication. A third group of violators typically broke laws related to property and had histories of poaching and trespassing.

Organized abuse of animals also has its links to other crimes. Humane Society of the United States investigator Bob Baker, who has extensive experience with dogfighting, says, "Dogfights are the scene of all kinds of crimes, including gambling, drug dealing, and possession of illegal weapons." He adds, "One of the most disturbing things is the number of children in attendance at these fights—from infants to teenagers. These children are exposed to all the brutality and illegal acts that go along with this sport."

The Role of Law Enforcement

Although some areas have humane agents with law enforcement powers, upholding animal welfare laws is usually the responsibility of local police. Law enforcement officers should be thoroughly familiar with anti-cruelty laws and recognize that reports of slain or injured animals can often uncover a variety of serious crimes including animal fighting, satanic or other cult practices, gang violence, family violence, and other offenses. Officers should get to know local animal control or humane society agents, as these people may be aware of trouble spots that have not come to police attention, or they may be able to provide helpful information on subjects already under investigation. Other points of contact for sharing such information include veterinarians, shelter workers, child welfare professionals and social workers.

Pets are often the first victims of family or neighborhood disputes that can escalate into violent and even fatal human encounters. Successful arbitration or counseling at an early stage might prevent serious future incidents. In questioning witnesses to violent crimes, it may be useful to obtain information about a suspect's treatment of pets, as witnesses may often be more willing to talk about mistreatment of animals than that of people. Finally, dealing seriously with animal problems can also be good public relations, since most people look favorably on those who help animals.

Intervention and Prevention

Cruelty to animals is a *crime* and should be treated as such. It is also a symptom of disturbed individuals and families, and a predictor of other problems in the making. Court actions against those who abuse animals have been rare, but an increasing number of courts are recognizing that early intervention may be very effective in preventing more serious incidents. Cases of severe or repeated violence against animals demand criminal punishment as well as psychiatric intervention, with less severe incidents at least resulting in referrals for counseling. Ideally such treatment should reach the entire family, not just the abuser. Since animal abuse is often part of a tangled web of family violence, the most effective treatment in severe cases involving children or adolescents may be the removal of the child from the family.⁸

Cases of chronic pet neglect are less predictive of violence against people, but these cases also require intervention. In such instances, court-ordered community service as well as educational programs emphasizing animal care and humane values can be effective.

Perhaps the most important approach to the problems of animal cruelty is *prevention*. Much abuse of animals is motivated by fear and ignorance of animals and an inability to empathize with the needs and feelings of others. Law enforcement officers, especially those who work with animals, can be an excellent aid to humane educators working to instill the knowledge and values that can help prevent children from starting on a destructive path. These efforts cannot undo generations of abuse, but they can be an effective step in breaking the vicious cycle of family violence which is self-perpetrating from one generation to another.

Footnotes

- ¹ Carson, Gerald 1972. *Men, Beasts and Gods*. New York, NY: Scribners.
- ² Wisconsin S. 948.18 (1988).
- ³ Felthous, Alan R. 1980. Aggression against cats, dogs, and people. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 10: 169-177.
- ⁴ Felthous, Alan R. and Kellert, Stephen R. 1986. Violence against animals and people: is aggression against living creatures generalized? *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry Law*, 14:55-69.
- ⁵ Robin, Michael, ten Bensel, Robert; Quigley, Joseph S.; and Anderson, Robert K. 1983. Childhood pets and psychosocial development of adolescents. In Aaron H. Katcher and Alan M. Beck (editors) *New Perspectives On Our Lives with Companion Animals*. Philadelphia, PA: U. Penn. Press 436-443.
- ⁶ DeViney, Elizabeth; Dickert, Jeffrey; and Lockwood, Randall. 1983. The care of pets within child abusing families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 4: 321-329.
- ⁷ Bessey, K. Michael. 1994. Patterns of involvement in wildlife crime: An empirical study. *Human Dimensions in Wildlife Newsletter*, 3(4): 1-7.
- ⁸ Rigdon, J.D.; Tapis, F., 1974. Children who are cruel to animals—a follow-up study. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 4:151-156.

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