

# **The Link Between Animal Abuse and a Culture of Violence**

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Earlier this morning, Michael Vick was in court, entering a guilty plea to conspiracy dog-fighting charges.

The timing of my presentation on animal abuse is coincidental, of course. Last April, when I promised this presentation for the Criminal Justice Institute, I couldn't have guessed that a \$10 million a year football player with a Nike contract would peak a national interest in dog-fighting.

But I *was* thinking about cases from my jurisdiction: the man who broke the necks of 10 puppies and the 17-year-old girl who opened the present left on her porch to find the head of her missing and beloved dog.

I knew that these cases were horribly sad. But I didn't realize the full implications of animal abuse until I participated in a conference last March at the University of Minnesota.

A number of people there really opened my eyes to the ways in which violence against animals is connected to a broader culture of violence. These people included Jane Hunt, who works for Partners for Violence Prevention in St. Paul, and Phil Arkow from the American Humane Association.

And then the horrible stories kept coming: a cat was beheaded, a kitten was tortured, a horse was stabbed to death. Senseless violence of animals was making headlines every week.

But these cases are just the tip of the iceberg. Investigators Keith Streff and Wade Hanson are employed by the Humane Society of Minnesota. They investigate animal cruelty and neglect statewide and present cases to local authorities for charging. They receive 3,000 – 5,000 calls a year.

The majority of the calls cite neglect – a caretaker who doesn't provide food, water, or adequate shelter for animals. Many of the calls alert them to hoarders – people who keep sometimes hundreds of animals in horrendous conditions under the delusion that they are helping their pets. But a good many also describe *intentional* cruelty to animals, from dog-fighting, to stabbings, to putting living animals in hot ovens, microwaves or freezers.

The cruelty, in itself, is heartbreaking. But almost always there is more to learn from these situations.

The humane investigator's charge is to investigate the cruelty and neglect of animals, but as they say, their job is really about people.

If an animal is being abused, chances are that someone else is suffering too – a spouse, a child, maybe an elderly person.

There is a connection between animal abuse and other forms of violence and it is called “The Link.”

Today I'm going to talk about how this link manifests itself in families, how it is related to other forms of violence in our communities, and how organized activities like dog-fighting exacerbate a culture of violence that goes far beyond their animal victims.

The link has been talked about for a hundred years and studied for over three decades. Animal abuse is connected to family violence and other crime.

One survey of pet-owning families with confirmed child abuse or neglect found that animals were abused in 88% of homes where physical child abuse was present.<sup>1</sup>

Another study of women in domestic violence shelters showed that 71% of those who had pets said that their partner had threatened, hurt, or killed their animals.<sup>2</sup>

When animals are neglected or abused, it is a red flag that others in the family may not be safe.

In a domestic violence setting, animal abuse happens as a way to control or intimidate other members of the family.

People are very attached to their pets. Abusers take advantage of this attachment and animals become helpless “pawns in a game of power and control.”<sup>3</sup>

## **VIDEO<sup>4</sup>**

The St. Paul dog-beheading case is another example of this game of fear and control. Crystal is a 17-year-old girl whose dog Chevy had gone missing after it had escaped from the house. The defendant, Anthony Gomez – who is scheduled for trial next month – is a

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<sup>1</sup> Deviney, E., Dickert, J., & Lockwood, R. (1983). The care of pets within child abusing families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 4, 321-329.

<sup>2</sup> Ascione, F. R. (1998). Battered women's reports of their partners' and their children's cruelty to animals. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 1 (1), 119-133.

<sup>3</sup> American Humane Association Fact Sheet, Quick Facts: Why is The Link important for Domestic Violence?

<sup>4</sup> Arkow, P. (2005). *Breaking the Cycles of Violence II*. DVD. Alameda, CA: Latham Foundation.

spurned boyfriend. A couple weeks after Chevy disappeared, the defendant's own cell phone video shows more than one person beheading the dog with a chainsaw. Then Gomez allegedly wrapped the head up in a box with some batteries and valentines candy and left it on Crystal's front porch.

While we do not know what exactly the defendant's future plans may have been, the allegations clearly show an effort to frighten and intimidate his former girlfriend – to show her how he could hurt something she loved.

One of the most dangerous times for battered women is when they are leaving their abusers. This is a dangerous time for animals as well.

Worrying about protecting the animals often keeps women from leaving abusive situations. 65% of women in a shelter who had pets that had been abused reported that they delayed leaving their homes – risking their own safety – because of concern for their pet.<sup>5</sup>

Animal investigators see the abuse of animals to intimidate people everyday. Men who game the system know that beating up a person can get them in trouble, so they find other ways to frighten their partners.

Seventy-five percent of the time pets are abused by family members, it is in the presence of women or children.<sup>6</sup>

Adults don't just abuse pets to blackmail their partners, they will also harm, threaten, or kill pets as a way to control children. This is frequently seen among victims of molestation – the perpetrator threatens the pet so the child will submit to sexual abuse or remain silent about it.

This is especially hurtful to children when we consider the role pets play in helping them cope with abuse.

A study of 40 childhood sexual abuse survivors found that pets often play a more supportive role for victims than other humans in the household.<sup>7</sup>

You can understand how debilitating a threat to a beloved pet can be.

Sometimes children then turn their natural affection for animals into contempt.

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<sup>5</sup> Carlisle-Frank, P., Frank, J. M., & Nielsen, L. (2004). Selective battering of the family pet. *Anthrozoos*, 17, 26-42.

<sup>6</sup> Ascione, F. R., Weber, C.V., & Wood, D.S. (1997). The abuse of animals and domestic violence: A national survey of shelters for women who are battered. *Society & Animals* 5 (3), 205-218.

<sup>7</sup> Barker, S. B., Barker, R. T., Dawson, K. S., & Knisely, J. S. (1997). The use of the family life space diagram in establishing interconnectedness: A preliminary study of sexual abuse survivors, their significant others, and pets. *Journal of Individual Psychology* 53 (4).

Mary Brown is the program manager for Women's Advocates, a shelter in St. Paul. While walking a pre-teen boy to the bus, Mary shared that she had a pet dog. The boy said, "I used to too."

Mary asked him to tell her about the dog.

He said, "I don't like dogs anymore."

She asked why, and he said that the mom's boyfriend had kicked the dog out of the house.

The boy had had so much pride about his dog. To now say that he didn't like dogs anymore was a way of protecting himself. He didn't want to care about a pet, because it could be taken away or harmed. It was more hurt just waiting to happen.

The abuse of animals becomes part of the cycle of violence that people perpetuate against each other generation after generation. Children who witness animal abuse are at a greater risk of themselves going on to abuse animals.

One study found that one out of every three mothers in a domestic violence shelter reported that their own children had hurt or killed their pets.<sup>8</sup>

Wade Hanson, one of the investigators I mentioned earlier, remembers one case in particular.

He got a call from a neighbor that a family dog was being abused. When he went to investigate, the family said that they were just playing rough with the dog.

The second call from the neighbors said that the parents were beating their kids in the backyard. When Wade investigated again he found the dog, hanging from the stairs, dead. The 8-year-old boy had killed him.

The boy went into protective custody, and later social service workers discovered that he was being abused by his stepfather.

When we see children abusing animals, we need to look into the very real possibility that these children are being abused themselves.

**But violence isn't just limited to the family.**

Research from Canada, the United States and Australia have all found a correlation between animal cruelty and other criminal activities.

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<sup>8</sup> Ascione, F. R. (1998). Battered women's reports of their partners' and their children's cruelty to animals. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 1 (1), 119-133.

Violent offenders in maximum security prisons are significantly “more likely than nonviolent offenders to have committed childhood acts of cruelty toward pets.”<sup>9</sup>

And though it is not too surprising to hear that those who have abused animals have higher rates of committing nearly every kind of crime, the link between sexual homicide and animal abuse is astonishing.

In 2005, John P. Clarke, an Australian researcher, surveyed 20 sexual homicide perpetrators, asking if they had ever harmed or killed any animals (and animals excluded insects, fish, and reptiles). All 20 of them, or 100%, responded that they had abused animals.<sup>10</sup>

The research also finds that animal abuse is a better predictor of sexual assault than previous convictions for homicide, arson or weapons offenses.<sup>11</sup>

And a review of some of the worst serial or mass killers has cruelty to animals as a common thread:

Jeffrey Dahmer impaled frogs and cats and beheaded a dog as a child. He went on to kill and dismember 17 people.

Brenda Spencer, the woman who open fired on a school yard in San Diego, killing 2 children and injuring 9 others, had repeatedly abused cats and dogs, often by setting their tails on fire.

The Son of Sam, The Boston Strangler, Ted Bundy, the BTK killer Dennis Rader, all tortured and killed animals before their violence escalated to people.

And all of the boys involved in school shootings between 1997 and 2001 had histories of being cruel to animals.

I want to acknowledge the connection between those serial killers and animal abuse because it is so strong. But I don't want you to relegate the association between animal abuse and violence to isolated incidents that make the front page.

It is more common, and more horrendous than we might think.

I have a video clip and it is not for the faint of heart. We really talked about whether to show this, but didn't think this issue should be sugar-coated. It is important, as criminal justice professionals to understand the reality of what we are talking about.

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<sup>9</sup> Merz-Perez, L., Heide, K. M., & Silverman, I. J. (2001). Childhood cruelty to animals and subsequent violence against humans. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 45 (5), 556-573.

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, J. P., & Gullone, E. (2005) Animal abuse, cruelty, and welfare: An Australian perspective. In press: *The International Handbook of Theory, Research, and Application on Animal Abuse and Cruelty*. Frank R. Ascione (Ed.) Purdue University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Id.

## VIDEO

Sometimes we need to viscerally remember what we are dealing with – and as disturbing and awful as this is, I have to tell you that there were some videos that were just too terrible to show.

When we see animal cruelty, it seems intuitive that the people practicing it will be violent in other ways.

One study has found that even a single known act of animal abuse was significantly predictive of future criminal behavior – even when the form of abuse is not as sadistic as others.<sup>12</sup>

FBI Special Agent Alan Brantley, who works in the Bureau’s behavioral science unit, said, “Animal cruelty is not a harmless venting of emotion in a healthy individual. This is a warning sign that this individual is not mentally healthy and needs some sort of intervention. Abusing animals does not dissipate those violent emotions, it may fuel them.”<sup>13</sup>

And the fueling of violent emotions and behavior is why the world of dog-fighting is so scary. Dog-fighting is an underground world but estimates suggest that there are as many as 40,000 people fighting dogs around the country.

Since the Michael Vick case has grabbed so much attention, I’ve been asked if dog fighting is in a different category from other forms of animal abuse – a sport or a business category that doesn’t so readily lend itself to being part of this link.

Does violence from dog-fighting really extend beyond the pit?

Before we look at that idea, I want to show you what we are talking about.

This is my last video clip.

## VIDEO

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- The owner is making this videotape to help sell this puppy. He wants to show the puppy’s winning lineage and the “gameness” of the dogs – in other words, their desire to keep fighting.
- This fight is taking place in the basement of the family home; notice the kids bikes and toys.

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<sup>12</sup> Arluke, A., Levin, J., Luke, C., & Ascione, F. (1999). The relationship of animal abuse to violence and other forms of antisocial behavior. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14, 963-975.

<sup>13</sup> Lockwood, R. & Church. Deadly serious: an FBI perspective on animal cruelty. *Humane Society News*, (Fall, 1996).

- Sometimes the dogs are quiet, saving all of their energy for the fight.
- These dogs are the only ones that will be on the brink of death and still wag their tails.
- The dogs seem to have mutually agreed upon resting periods.
- The puppy, raised in isolation from people and contact with other animals, watches from behind the cage.
- The fight goes on for 30 minutes or so. After which, the owner goes upstairs to open Christmas presents with his children.
- Here's the dog. You can see how injured his ears are, fresh from the fight.

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This tape is from Minnesota. The man is from St. Paul.

Aside from the fact that these children were literally living on top of the dog-fighting, this example shows the “link” in yet another way.

This tape, and the dog-fighting operation surrounding it, were found only after his girlfriend fled a terrifying domestic violence episode at his hands.

The spine-chilling complaint describes how he threw her on a bed, choked her, ripped her necklace, hid her purse and keys and pulled the phone out of the wall when she tried to call 911.

He told her that if she tried to leave, he would tie her up, duct tape her, and then bury her, and that no one would find her. She was scared to leave because the pit bulls that surrounded the house would bark.

In the end, she escaped. When investigators looked into her complaint, they found the dogs, and evidence that they were being fought. But they might never have found it if not for the tip from a domestic violence victim.

This connection between violence and crime and dog-fighting is not an isolated example.

The Chicago Police Department has made enforcement of dog-fighting a key part of their anti-violence strategy because “82% of offenders arrested for animal abuse violations had

priors for battery, weapons offenses or drugs.”<sup>14</sup> And one out of every three times they execute a warrant for animal abuse, they seize narcotics or weapons.<sup>15</sup>

Humane educator Sierra Cleveland reports that 31% of inner-city youth have been to a dog-fight. Gangs routinely take kids 10 – 12 years old to dog-fights to desensitize them to violence.

You don’t to have a big venue like a barn. Dog fights happen in back yards, in basements, on street corners. The wager could be over thousands of dollars, a girl, or a gram of crack.

These fights affect children in a number of ways. Not only are they taught to take pleasure in the pain of a creature, but they are taught that their affection for a being is expendable. Very often the parents are taking the *family pet* (as we saw in the video) into the dog fight, where it will likely be injured or killed. Imagine what that does to a child.

Animal cruelty is one of the first signs of conduct disorder in a child – before bullying, cruelty to people, vandalism, or setting fires. It often begins in early childhood, as young as 4 – 6 years old.<sup>16</sup>

This is when children learn about how they control their environment. They imitate what they see. And they learn from adults that hurting a helpless animal is one way they can exert power over their world.

But if it is identified early, we have an opportunity for timely, more effective prevention.

First and foremost, they can be taken out of abusive environments.

But second, as kids are desensitized to the abuse of people and animals, they can also be resensitized.

A number of programs in Minnesota are taking kids who are at risk of repeating abusive behavior and pairing them with dogs to teach empathy and respect. It is incredibly important to helping break the cycle of abuse facing these children.

My main goal here today is to help put the abuse of animals and its connection to other forms of violence on our radar screens. As Keith Streff says, “All of law enforcement is about exposure.”

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<sup>14</sup> Chicago Crime Commission. (2004, August). RAV2: Reduce animal violence, reduce all violence: A program to amplify human and animal violence prevention and reduction by targeting dog fighting and animal cruelty. *Action Alert*, 1-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Ascione, F.R. (2001, September). Animal abuse and youth violence. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Once we know how interconnected animal abuse and other forms of violence are, we start to see it.

The abuse of animals is often easier to discover than other forms of family abuse.

Neighbors are more likely to report it. If someone is beating their wife or kids, neighbors may think “it is a family matter.”

But a neighbor *will* call animal control or police to report abuse of an animal.

Second, both perpetrators and victims are more likely to reveal pet abuse first. Perpetrators tend to think that abusing animals is no big deal and won't get them in trouble. They may be free with a detailed confession, not understanding the potential consequences.

Battered women may be able to make excuses for why they are beaten, but not be able to excuse abuse against their animals. And children are often more willing to talk about abuse against their pets than themselves. This is a great way to start a conversation with a child, “Tell me about your dog...”

Beyond seeing the abuse, there are several things we can do:

*First*, we can recognize the role animals play as pawns in domestic violence situations and allow restraining orders and orders of protection for animals.

Maine passed such legislation two years ago and others states have followed. Minnesota should look at this in the upcoming session.

*Second*, we can support the creation of emergency pet shelters for families fleeing domestic violence.

Cornerstone in Bloomington has had a pet protection program for the past six years. The pets are taken care of by a generous veterinarian who has volunteered her services and space for pets in crisis.

Animal Ark in Hastings also has a network of foster families who can care for animals until a family leaves a shelter.

Advocates bear witness to the relief felt by women, *and their children*, when they know their pets are in a safe place.

*Third*, we need to require the cross-training of human and animal service professionals about The Link. Everyone who comes in contact with a family, from child protection workers to animal control officers, need to recognize how the welfare of the animal may be indicative of the welfare of the child, spouse, or elderly parent.

Animal control officers very often get to see the inside of a home when they check on an animal. These are opportunities to see children, spouses, and the condition of the house.

Veterinarians are another important reporting group. Studies show that families in which pets are abused take their animals to the veterinarian just as much as everyone else.<sup>17</sup> Nearly 73% of the time, women take care of the pets – feeding and taking them to the vet.<sup>18</sup> So vets will likely encounter not just the pet, but the mother, and often the children too – the three groups most likely to be suffering abuse.

*Fourth*, as prosecutors and judges we need to ask for and require psychological counseling for individuals convicted of animal cruelty. In many ways, these are the individuals who are most at risk for committing horrendous crimes – becoming serial killers, committing sexual homicides, or abusing family members.

There is a group working on these and related issues, informally called the Family Violence and Animal Abuse Working Group. If you are interested, please contact Jane Hunt at [jhunt@partnersforviolenceprevention.org](mailto:jhunt@partnersforviolenceprevention.org), 651-298-4566.

The most important thing we can do, whether we are a parent or a neighbor, a police officer or a prosecutor, is take the abuse of animals seriously.

For the animals themselves.

And for others who may be at risk.

Keith Streff hopes that Michael Vick is doing for animal abuse what O.J. Simpson did for domestic violence – shining a spotlight on it so that people start seeing it for what it is and start doing something about it.

In the end, none of us are immune from the tragedies of our day. We each have a responsibility to take all acts of violence seriously. For our own families, our communities, and our future.

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<sup>17</sup> Deviney, E., Dickert, J., & Lockwood, R. (1983). The care of pets within child abusing families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems* 4, 321-329.

<sup>18</sup> American Veterinary Medical Association. (2002). *U.S. Pet ownership & demographics sourcebook*. Schaumburg, IL: American Veterinary Medical Association.