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Commentary

Behind the mask: Animal abuse perpetration as an indicator of risk for first responders to domestic violence



“He was excellent at wearing a mask. He seemed so kind and compassionate to those on the outside, but he was the complete opposite within the walls of our home. He was physically and emotionally abusive to me and my children. He killed our German Shepherd in front of our oldest when he discovered I was planning to leave. No one believed me when I asked others for help. One friend even said ‘how is that possible? He seems like such a nice person?’ He wasn’t. I feared for my life every day.” – Domestic Violence Survivor

Risks of harm for police officers responding to domestic violence

First responders receive calls requesting assistance relating to a wide range of incidents, but no call may come more frequently, particularly for police officers, than a report of domestic violence. In fact, in some communities, as much as 50 % of all police calls are related to a domestic disturbance [1]. Research is clear regarding the associated risks of great physical and emotional harm for ALL who reside in a home where domestic violence occurs. This risk also extends to first responders to the scene of these incidents.

Prior reports indicate at least 8% of police officer line of duty deaths occur while the officer is responding to a report of a domestic disturbance/domestic violence – making these calls among the deadliest incidents officers respond to [2,3]. Officers are more likely to be killed when responding to a domestic disturbance/domestic violence than they are when responding to burglaries, robberies, assaults, and even reports of shots fired [2,3]. Most officer homicides are committed by firearm and when substance status for the offender is known, 68 % of these offenders are found to be under the influence of a substance at the time of the homicide (FBI Status of Known Offender, 2018).

In addition to risk of homicide, police officers are also at risk of suffering a non-fatal injury when responding to a domestic disturbance. Officers seem to largely be aware of this increased risk as one international study found that 76 % of U.S. law enforcement officers and 79 % of Australian officers felt that were at greatest risk of injury when responding to domestic violence than when responding to any other type of call [4]. Over 4000 police officers are assaulted each year in the United States when responding to domestic violence and nearly half of these officers require medical attention for their injuries [5].

Risks of harm for families experiencing domestic violence

Victims of domestic violence are at great risk of suffering physical, sexual, and emotional harm. Though most attention is paid to physical and sexual abuse, emotional and psychological harm, in the absence of effective intervention is likely to significantly impact them for the rest of

their life. Long after bruises fade, emotional injury remains. Perpetrators may often target those most vulnerable in the home, children and pets, to further this emotional and psychological harm.

Risk of harm for families experiencing domestic violence is not limited to humans in the home but often extends to animals who reside in the household as well. Domestic violence perpetrators may target companion animals to further or gain control over the household, especially when the adult victim appears to be considering ending the relationship or fleeing the abuse occurring in the home [6]. In addition to experiencing direct harm at the hands of the perpetrator it is also important to note that companion animals are likely to be significantly emotionally impacted in witnessing abuse and harm to the humans they love. These human and animal family units may often form a strong bond during their victimization, resulting in emotional harm to all members of the family unit when any single member is abused. This speaks to the importance of better understanding the concept that it may be impossible to separate the well-being of the victims in these homes, we must help ALL of them (including pets) to best help ANY of them.

Pets are even more likely to be present in homes where domestic violence occurs than in homes where it does not occur, with nearly 80 % of domestically violent homes having one or more pets [7]. While dogs and cats are the most common pets reported in these homes, since perpetrators may target these animals due to the companionship they often provide for victims in the home, it is important to note that ALL animals in the household could be at risk of suffering abuse. In more rural environments, this risk may extend to livestock, chickens, horses, and other animals that can provide comfort to victims.

Adults and children who reside in these homes are often significantly impacted by threats or perpetrated harm to pets – many rely heavily on these animal companions for critical components of mental health such as support, consistency, comfort, and unconditional love. In fact, for many of these victims, pets may be the sole source of many of these critical feelings and emotions. Pet abuse appears to be alarmingly prevalent in homes where domestic violence occurs as studies often find that 50 % or more of victims in domestic violence shelters report the perpetrator also threatened or harmed their companion animals [8–10]. Of further concern is the fact that if children reside in the home, as much as 76 % of the time they will directly witness these abusive acts toward animals [7]. Perpetrators may intentionally commit acts of animal abuse in front of the children to ensure inflicting as much harm on the household as possible.

Though many victims of domestic violence live with daily fear of harm, risk appears to significantly increase when the domestic violence perpetrator also has a history of abusing pets. My recent study found that when a perpetrator of domestic violence also had a history of abusing pets, human victims in the home were significantly more likely to report experiencing forced sex, strangulation, threatened/harmed by a weapon,

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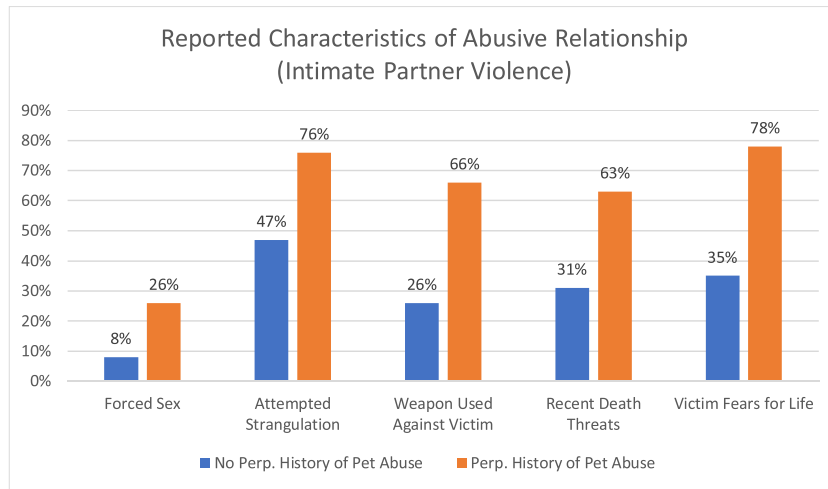


Fig. 1. Reported Characteristics of Abusive Relationship by Perp. History of Pet Abuse [11].

recent death threats, and living with daily fear they WILL BE KILLED by the perpetrator (Fig. 1; [11]). While both sexes are at risk to be victimized by domestic violence, data indicates perpetrators of domestic violence who also abuse animals are overwhelmingly more likely to be male [11].

Risks for officers when a domestic violence perpetrator also harms pets

While responding to a domestic disturbance is already often considered among the most dangerous calls for a police officer to respond to [12], this risk is likely to increase when the domestic violence perpetrator also has a history of abusing pets in the home. Domestic violence perpetrators who also abuse pets are significantly more likely to have a history of mental illness and/or abuse substances, have threatened or attempted suicide, and to have a gun (Fig. 2; [11]) – a dangerous combination that increases risk for fatal outcomes that include victim/officer homicide and perpetrator suicide [13].

Additionally, while research has found domestic violence victims will on average experience ten violent incidents before calling law enforcement, when the abuser has a history of harming pets in the home too, victims will wait until they experience 20–40 incidents before calling law enforcement [11]. Fear of harm to pets or others in the home if they report the incidents may often be a key reason for this delay. These additional 10–30 incidents and 8 to 12-month delay before a report is made, is critical, considering that domestic violence incidents often increase in

severity over time. Risk of fatal injury is also likely to increase – not only for the victim in the home but for others as well. At least 20 % of all domestic violence homicide victims are not an intimate partner of the perpetrator, and include first responders to the incident, family members, and members of the community [14].

My recent analysis of nearly 10,000 police officer reports and observations from the scene of domestic disturbances in Marion County, Indiana discovered officers report victims in homes where domestic violence and pet abuse co-occur to be significantly more likely to appear apologetic, nervous, crying, and complaining of pain on scene than when the domestic violence perpetrator did not have a history of harming pets in the home [11]. These observations are not surprising given the increased risk of harm data clearly indicates in these households.

What *may be* surprising however, is that the perpetrators in homes where domestic violence and pet abuse co-occur were significantly more likely to be observed by officers on scene as calm, apologetic, or crying, than offenders with no known history of pet abuse, a disposition that may cause responders to underestimate the threat the offender likely presents. It is *critical* that responders are aware that this outward showing of emotion by the perpetrator in these scenarios may be nothing more than a mask. Data clearly indicates these perpetrators present great risk to all and officers must remember what real danger may lie *just below* this deceptive surface.

Further, domestic violence perpetrators who also abuse pets are *less likely* to be arrested than those who do not abuse pets [11]. Arrests often

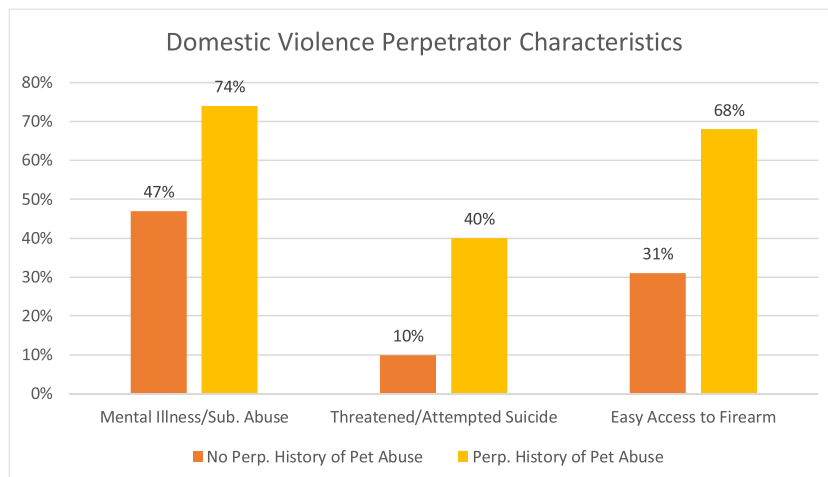


Fig. 2. Domestic Violence Perpetrator Characteristics by History of Pet Abuse, Campbell et al. [11].

provide a critical window of time, while the perpetrator is detained, for victims to seek shelter or reach out for further assistance. Arrests may be particularly important in scenarios where the DV perpetrator also harms pets in the home, as victims who fear for the safety of companion animals may be much less likely to ever seek shelter [15], since many shelters in the United States still do not provide on-site services for pets. In fact, many victims report delaying leaving an abusive relationship because the domestic violence shelter won't allow them to bring their pet. Victims know that leaving that pet behind is likely a death sentence for the animal and instead often remain in the relationship or choose to live in their car.

One reason animal-abusing domestic violence perpetrators were less likely to be arrested in my study [11] was that they had already fled the scene by the time officers arrived. Perpetration of animal abuse has also been tied to increased risk for committing many other forms of violence and crime and these perpetrators may flee the scene as a result of this prior record with law enforcement. Officers must remember that safety plans are extremely necessary in this scenario as these perpetrators are likely to return to the home and risk will likely only increase now that abuse has been reported.

In spite of the risks associated with responding to these incidents and the high risk of harm also shared by the human and animal members of the household, a recent study found only 59 % of police officers felt it was important to assess risk for homicide at every domestic violence scene [16]. While officers may often fear for their own safety while filling out lengthy risk assessments on scene (a scene that may be unstable and chaotic), a history of perpetrator pet abuse is critical information with immediate implications for the safety of all at the scene of the incident. There appear to be few other incident/household characteristics that seem to increase risk so dramatically for ALL with an affirmative response. A history of pet abuse makes it more likely the perpetrator will have a gun and abuse substances, two key variables often identified in perpetrators of law enforcement officer homicides [11].

Responding officers to the scene of a domestic violence incident MUST ask about threatened or perpetrated harm to animals in the home (occurring now or in the past) and recognize the clear implications of a DV perpetrator history of pet abuse. Regardless of how the perpetrator presents on scene, they are significantly more likely to have mental illness, abuse substances, have threatened or attempted suicide, and to have a gun. Are you asking about animals when responding to incidents of domestic violence in your community? If not, it is time to start doing so. The lives you save by including perpetrator pet abuse in your domestic violence risk assessment, may include your own.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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Andrew M. Campbell

Campbell Research & Consulting, Indianapolis, IN, United States