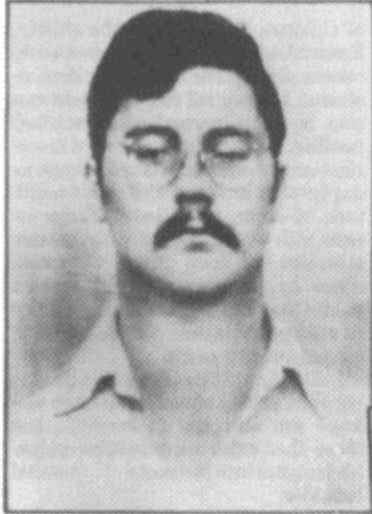


A REPRINT FROM THE HUMANE SOCIETY NEWS • SUMMER 1986

# THE TANGLED WEB OF ANIMAL ABUSE:

## The Links between Cruelty to Animals and Human Violence

—Wide World Photos, Inc.



Four of the most famous violent criminals in recent years had histories of abusing animals: (top left to right) Edmund Emil Kemper III; David Berkowitz; James Oliver Huberty; and (below) Albert DeSalvo.



—The San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Witnesses said a San Francisco man kicked this puppy to death. When SPCA officials checked police files to see if the accused had a prior criminal record, they discovered he was also wanted on a felony charge. The man later was found guilty of a violent crime and sentenced to the state penitentiary. The link between violent behavior and animal abuse is only now coming to the attention of many in the criminal justice system.

© 1986 by The HSUS. All rights reserved.



The Humane Society of the United States  
2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037

“Anyone who has accustomed himself to regard the life of any living creature as worthless is in danger of arriving also at the idea of worthless human lives.”

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Animal abuse is not just the result of some personality flaw in the abuser, but a symptom of a deeply disturbed family.

Scientists and lawmakers are slowly beginning to acknowledge the humane movement's long-held position that society's treatment of animals is inseparable from its treatment of human beings.

by Dr. Randall Lockwood and Guy R. Hodge

In 1984, Pennsylvania SPCA officials arrested Dwayne Wright for attacking six dogs with lye in a highly publicized cruelty case. The SPCA reported that “the grisly attacks apparently were committed just to see the dogs suffer.” Before Mr. Wright could stand trial for these offenses in Pennsylvania, however, law enforcement officials in New Jersey requested his extradition to face murder charges in the death of a disabled man. Mr. Wright is presently serving a twenty-year sentence for murder.

Such stories of people who exhibit violence toward both human beings and animals are disturbingly common and come as little surprise to those involved with animal welfare. The belief that one's treatment of animals is closely associated with the treatment of fellow human beings has a long history in philosophy. This idea served as the ethical foundation for the rise of the animal-welfare movement during the nineteenth century.

Despite the widespread historical recognition of the link between cruelty to animals and other forms of violent or antisocial behavior, this connection has, until recently, largely been ignored by law-enforcement agencies, the judicial system, social service agencies, and others in a position to take action. This is not surprising when we consider how long it has taken society to recognize widespread problems of child abuse and other manifestations of domestic violence.

Over the last decade, social scientists and human-service agencies have finally begun to examine cruelty to animals as a serious *human* problem. What has prompted this concern? First, there have been many dramatic cases such as that of Mr. Wright. Second, social scientists have been paying increasing attention to all forms of family violence, including abuse and neglect

of children, spouses, and the elderly. Researchers studying human-animal relationships have repeatedly demonstrated the central role that pets can play in many normal and disturbed families. Increasing numbers of investigations of organized cruelty, such as dogfighting, have revealed that a multitude of other, unrelated offenses co-exist with that activity. Finally, greater attention has been drawn to animal abuse by an increasingly concerned public that has responded negatively to mild punishments handed down in animal-cruelty cases.

Scientific studies of the connections between animal abuse and human violence are still few in number, but those that exist are providing valuable insights into the roots of antisocial behavior.

#### Animal Cruelty and Adult Violence

Much of the early evidence that inspired interest in this issue came from anecdotal case histories of individual criminals. There is compelling circumstantial evidence linking two groups of criminals—serial and mass murderers—with acts of cruelty to animals. There is a significantly high incidence of such acts, usually prior to age twenty-five, among people who have engaged in multiple murders:

- Albert DeSalvo, the self-confessed “Boston Strangler” who killed thirteen women in 1962-63 and was sentenced to life imprisonment on unrelated charges of armed robbery, assault, and sex offenses involving four women, had, in his youth, trapped dogs and cats in orange crates and shot arrows through the boxes.

- Edmund Emil Kemper III, convicted in 1973 on eight counts of first-degree murder for killing eight women, including his mother, had revealed at his trial that he had a history of abusing cats and dogs.

• David Berkowitz, New York City's "Son of Sam" gunman who pleaded guilty to thirteen murder and attempted murder charges, had shot a neighbor's Labrador retriever. Berkowitz claimed that the dog was the spiritual force that compelled him to kill.

• Brenda Spencer fired forty shots from a rifle at arriving San Diego school children, fatally wounding two and injuring nine others. During the subsequent investigation, neighbors informed police that Ms. Spencer had repeatedly abused dogs and cats, often by

setting their tails on fire.

• Carroll Edward Cole, one of the most prolific killers in modern history, was executed in December of 1985 for five of the thirty-five murders of which he was accused. Mr. Cole had said that his first act of violence

### Reporting Cruelty

As a rule, failure to provide adequate food, water, and shelter or the use of physical force sufficient to leave a mark or otherwise cause injury constitutes cruelty to animals according to most state laws.

If you believe an animal is being mistreated, promptly telephone your local animal-welfare agency. If you cannot obtain a listing for a local humane society, call the local police for assistance. If there is no humane society in the area, then the police should investigate your complaint. Provide the dispatcher with all the details, including:

- A description of the incident and type of abuse
- The date and time of the incident
- A description of the animal(s)
- The exact address at which the animal can be found
- The name of the animal's owner, if any
- A description of the abuser (age, height, weight) and name, if known
- Any other relevant details such as license plate numbers that may aid in apprehending the abuser
- Your name, address, and telephone number. Also inform the dispatcher if you were an eyewitness to the incident. If your information is to be of value to law-enforcement and animal-welfare agencies, you must be willing to testify against animal abusers.



-HSUS

as a child was to strangle a puppy.

• In 1984, James Huberty was shot by police after killing twenty-one children and adults at a McDonalds restaurant in San Ysidro, California. As a teenager, Mr. Huberty had been accused of having shot his neighbor's dog with an airgun.

Although most animal abusers will not commit sensational murders, serial killers almost invariably have histories of animal abuse earlier in their lives. This connection has serious implications for law enforcement, since the Federal Bureau of Investigation has indicated that brutal and irrational serial killings account for one-quarter of all unsolved murders in the United States each year.

Single case histories 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 scientists have looked at larger populations of criminals to explore this association. In 1966, Drs. D.S. Hellman and Nathan Blackman published one of the first formal studies. Their analysis of life histories of eighty-four prison inmates showed that 75 percent of those charged with violent crimes had an early record of cruelty to animals, fire-setting, and bed-wetting. Several subsequent studies looked for this "triad" of symptoms in other violent criminals, with mixed results.

Over the last few years, a different picture has emerged. Psychiatrist Alan Felthous surveyed several groups of violent adults. In one group of eighteen psychiatric patients who had repeatedly tortured dogs and cats, he found that all had high levels of aggression to people, including one patient who had murdered a boy. These abusers also shared a common history of brutal parental punishment. Dr. Felthous and others have thus identified a slightly different triad consisting

of physical abuse by parents, cruelty to animals, and violence toward people. Almost all serious animal abusers are males, but Dr. Felthous has found similar patterns in the lives of assaultive women as well.

One of the most detailed surveys of adult criminals has recently been done by Dr. Felthous and Dr. Stephen Kellert. They looked at animal cruelty among three groups of men including aggressive criminals, nonaggressive criminals, and noncriminals. Ratings of aggressiveness for the criminals were based on reports of their behavior in prison, not on the violence of their crimes. Among the aggressive criminals, 25 percent reported five or more childhood acts of cruelty toward animals, compared to 6 percent of the nonaggressive criminals and none in the sample of noncriminals. Aggressive criminals were also more likely to report fear or dislike of particular animals.

This study is one of the first to explore the specific motives behind animal cruelty in these violent men. Some resorted to cruelty to control an animal's behavior, for example, using beatings and electric prods to gain compliance from dogs. Many of the men used violence as a form of retaliation. One burned a cat that had scratched him, and another drowned a dog that barked too much. A third motivation was prejudice. Many abusers harbor hatred for specific animals. Cats were victims because they were often seen as "sneaky" and "creepy."

This study identified additional complex motives for animal abuse. Some cruelty came from a desire to shock other people or to impress them with the abuser's capacity for violence. In some cases, cruelty to animals was used to retaliate against others, especially neighbors.

Animal cruelty has been correlated with other forms of adult wrongdoing.

A recent study 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. HSUS 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!"

#### Animal Cruelty and Juvenile Violence

Most of the research on animal abuse and adult crime has indicated that the first instances of cruelty to animals take place early in the abusers' lives. As anthropologist Margaret Mead noted, "One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child is to kill or torture an animal and get away with it." Nearly all young children go through a stage of "innocent" cruelty during which they may harm insects or other small animals in the process of exploring the world and discovering their abilities. Most children, however, with proper guidance from parents and teachers, can be

come sensitive to the fact that animals can experience pain and suffering and thus try to avoid causing such pain. Some, however, seem to become locked into a pattern of cruelty that can last a lifetime.

In 1971, Dr. Fernando Tapia reviewed the cases of eighteen boys who were under treatment because of incidents of severe cruelty to animals. All showed other problems of violence including bullying, theft, and arson. Most had histories of parental neglect, brutality, and rejection. Seven years later, Dr. Tapia was able to follow up on thirteen of these cases, now entering young adulthood. Eight of the thirteen were still involved in animal cruelty. In general, animal abuse ended only in the case of the boys who had been removed from abusive parents and placed in foster homes.

What starts young boys on the road to animal cruelty and later violence against people? Some have suggested that these children lack the capacity to love, to form close ties to either people or animals, but recent research suggests that it is not that simple. A University of Minnesota study by Dr. Michael Robin and others looked at attitudes towards animals in 507 delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents. Nearly all of these children (91 percent) reported having had a "special pet" at some time in their lives. The delinquent children were three times more likely to report that they sought out their pet during times of trouble and discussed their problems with it. A key difference between the delinquent and nondelinquent groups was that 34 percent of the delinquent children had lost their special pet through intentional or accidental killing. In many cases, an abusive father had disposed of this loved animal in some violent way, resulting in deep resentment on the part of the child.

It may be that some juveniles begin

to abuse animals to convince themselves that they don't care about the things they often seem to lose. Some are convinced of their "badness" by parents and behave in the way that they think is expected of them. Some are imitating the family violence that seems to be a "normal" way of life for them. Others feel helpless and use animals as victims to demonstrate their power and authority or as scapegoats for the anger they feel against parents or society as a whole. Finally, some of these young abusers simply seem to have never learned to value the lives of others.

#### Animal Abuse and Family Problems

The research we have described strongly suggests that animal abuse is not just the result of some personality flaw in the abuser, but a symptom of a deeply disturbed family. As Boris Levinson has observed, "Pets mirror the tensions of their adopted families." Research specifically looking at family dynamics supports this idea.

In 1980, James Hutton reviewed RSPCA cruelty reports for one community in England. Of twenty-three families with a history of animal abuse, 83 percent had been identified by human social service agencies as having children at risk of abuse or neglect. In 1983, Deviney, Dickert, and Lockwood reported on the care of pets within fifty-seven families being treated by New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services because of the incidents of child abuse. At least one person had abused pets in 88 percent of the families in which children had been physically abused! In about two-thirds of these cases, it was the abusive parent who had killed or injured a pet. Children were the abusers in the remaining third. These and other studies confirm that cruelty to animals can be one of many signs of a

family in need of professional help.

#### Animal Abuse and Mental Illness

Although it would seem to be clear that many animal abusers are in need of help, the psychiatric community has been very slow to recognize this. Surprisingly, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the "handbook" for many professionals in the American Psychiatric Association, makes no mention of cruelty to animals as a sign of mental illness. This troubles many concerned psychiatrists, including Dr. Peter Field of the Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. That organization recommends that "children who abuse animals be referred for appropriate treatment inasmuch as this is not a benign stage of growing up, but rather a sign of emotional illness."

Other psychiatrists have found additional links between animal abuse and mental disorders. Dr. Eugene Bliss, a University of Utah psychiatrist and expert on multiple personalities, has described the strange case of "Andrea." This woman had twenty-eight distinct personalities, two of which had killed cats. Like many patients with this disorder, her personality had begun to split when she was a victim of physical and psychological abuse. On at least one occasion, her father had punished her by forcing her to watch him throw kittens in a roaring furnace. Dr. Frank Putnam of the National Institutes of Mental Health has noted that witnessing such acts of cruelty can be as traumatic as being a victim of physical abuse.

Animal abuse rarely involves a single act of cruelty against one victim. It is part of a complex net of disturbed relationships that we are just beginning to understand. Within this tangled web, an abused child becomes violent to others, including animals.

It is likely that he, too, is at risk of becoming an abusive parent who, in turn, may produce another generation of violent children.

What can those of us involved in animal welfare do to help the people and animals caught in this web? First, although the connection between cruelty to animals and other human problems has been well established by careful research, many professionals seem unaware of this work. It is important to share this information with those who are in a position to see such problems, including veterinarians, law-enforcement officers, animal-control officers, humane agents, shelter workers, and child-welfare professionals. It is also helpful to get people in these professions talking to each other. Often, they discover that they have been dealing with some of the same families or individuals.

Second, as Drs. Kellert and Felthous point out, "Most judicial authorities tend to minimize the importance of animal cruelty among children." It is essential to urge appropriate psychiatric intervention in the case of adult and juvenile offenders. Ideally, such treatment must deal with the entire family, not just the abuser.

Crime is not only a symptom of other disorders, but animal abuse in and of itself is also a *crime* that often occurs alongside other crimes. Cruelty to animals is generally a misdemeanor punishable by fine and imprisonment, but such penalties are rare. The humane public can voice its concern. In recent cases in Florida, California, Virginia, and Louisiana, outspoken citizens have played a major role in getting stiff penalties for animal abusers.

In a recent case, two seventeen-year-old boys were caught as they attempted to decapitate a cat but went unpunished. The local district attorney offered sound advice to several HSUS members who complained about

this mild treatment. He wrote: "It is obvious by the number of letters I have received that this case has stirred the emotions of many, many people. It would be my suggestion that you advise your local legislators of your concerns and urge them to act on strengthening our Juvenile Court System. Your position is correct and, perhaps, working together, we can effect change which would help stop such violent acts." Another way in which you can help is to be alert to the possibility of animal abuse in your community. Many abusers are able to hide their actions from law enforcement officials as well as from friends and even families. Their best protection has been the fear and silence of others. There are definite steps you can take when you see or suspect cruelty to animals (see sidebar).

Some states, recognizing the severity of the problem, are making it easier to fight cruelty. Wisconsin and Minnesota have enacted unusual statutes that ensure the investigation of cruelty complaints even in the absence of a local humane society. The laws allow a citizen who has reason to believe that an act of cruelty has occurred to apply to a circuit court for a search warrant. A judge will question the citizen and any other witnesses under oath. If the court is satisfied that there is probable cause to believe that an act of abuse has occurred, the judge may issue a warrant directing a local law enforcement officer to "proceed immediately" to the location, conduct a search, and take custody of any animals on the property. The judge also has the authority to direct that a veterinarian accompany law enforcement officers to help with the investigation or to aid the animals. If your community lacks the resources to investigate animal cruelty, similar statutes might be helpful in combating this problem.

Perhaps the most important approach to the problem of animal cruelty is *prevention*. Some acts take place because authority figures *allow* them to occur by failing to discipline childhood episodes of cruelty. Without proper intervention, children may graduate to more serious abuses including violence against people. Do not ignore even minor acts of cruelty. Correct the child and, when possible, express your concerns to his or her parents. Appropriate intervention may, in this way, stop a cycle of escalating abuse.

We also know that some abuse is motivated by fear and ignorance of animals and an inability to empathize with the needs and feelings of others. Humane educators constantly work to instill the knowledge and values that can help prevent children from starting on a destructive path. These efforts cannot undo generations of abuse and other family problems, but they can be an effective step in breaking the vicious cycle of family violence.

Scientists and lawmakers are slowly beginning to acknowledge the humane movement's long-held position that society's treatment of animals is inseparable from its treatment of human beings. This "new" realization echoes the sentiment of eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant: "He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men. We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals."

---

A bibliography on this subject is available from Dr. Randall Lockwood, The HSUS, 2100 L St., N.W., Washington, DC 20037.

---

*Dr. Randall Lockwood is director of Higher Education Programs and Guy R. Hodge is director of Data and Information Services for The HSUS.*

---