

Resource Center

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Gender and Nonhuman Animal Cruelty Convictions: Data from Pet-Abuse.com

Society & Animals Resource Column

The goal of this resource column is two-fold: to introduce researchers and other readers to a new resource, www.Pet-abuse.com, and to demonstrate its use. Because this column is limited in space, it is not possible to review the animal cruelty literature. There are many excellent resources on this topic including two edited volumes (Lockwood & Ascione, 1998; Ascione & Arkow, 1999). Scholarly articles published on animal abuse and cruelty agree on the following: There is a need to establish definitions and standardized measures of animal abuse and cruelty (Ascione, 1998; Ascione & Lockwood, 2001); there is a link between violence toward humans and violence toward nonhuman animals (Ascione, Friedrich, Heath, & Hayashi, 2003; Merz-Perez, Heide, & Silverman, 2001); and animal abuse is a diagnostic indicator of Conduct Disorder (Ascione & Lockwood).

Gender as a variable in animal cruelty seems to be a given. In his review of animal cruelty, Flynn (2001) states,

One of the most consistent factors associated with perpetration of animal abuse is gender. Almost all abusers are males. . . . In my study of 267 college undergraduates, male students were nearly four times more likely than females to report abusing animals as children or adolescents. Slightly more than one-third of males (34.5%), but just fewer than 10% of females (9.3%), reported that they had been cruel to animals. (pp. 74, 75)

There is one known exception to this gender pattern. That exception is the category of animal hoarding. According to one study by Patronek (Kuehn, 2002), approximately three-quarters of animal hoarders are female. Information on the Animal Hoarding Research Consortium (2004) website states,

. . . the stereotype of an animal hoarder is that of a single, older woman, living alone and socioeconomically disadvantaged. Like any stereotype, there is some support in existing data. However, it is important to recognize that hoarding knows no age, gender, or socioeconomic boundaries.

The website Pet-Abuse.com was developed in response to the fatal torturing of Bert the cat in Del Mar, California. According to the founder of Pet-Abuse.com,

Someone kidnapped one of our (town's) most adored cats, drove her 15 miles away to the next town, and set her on fire. Two days in one of the best veterinary emergency rooms on the west coast later, little Bert died, with 3rd degree burns over 75% of her body, internal bleeding, and kidney failure. (A. Gianotto, personal communication, 2004)

Despite community efforts to catch the perpetrator, the perpetrator remains at large and is believed to have fled the country (Gianotto, 2004). Gianotto, a professional computer programmer, tried to assist officials who were searching for the perpetrator by creating a database of case information and making that database available to all agencies involved in solving the crime. The database developed into a website dedicated to cataloguing and archiving cases of animal abuse and cruelty not only from the United States but also from a number of other countries—in the hope that it would assist law enforcement agencies in capturing animal abusers.

The site Pet-Abuse.com collects animal abuse cases from a number of sources and enters the variables into a publicly accessible, interactive, searchable database. For some cases, there also are photographs of the victims. A visitor to the site can request cases and perpetrators according to a number of different variables, such as disposition of the case (convicted, alleged, dismissed); age of perpetrator; gender of perpetrator, and type of abuse (Table 1). The database also reports sentences given to convicted individuals and allows site visitors to indicate their opinion on the punishment. The website can generate real time graphs of the existing data. The database also flags cases in which the perpetrator is known to have a history of domestic violence.

Additional new cruelty case information is sought actively by the website founder and also is submitted to the website by individuals who work in the animal cruelty area. In addition, work is underway to add data from historical cases to the website. Sadly, the database is ever-expanding. On August 1, 2004, there were 2440 cases and 2778 abusers in the database. As of this writing (August 14, 2004), there are 2481 cases listed and a total of 2808 abusers. A simple search of the database reveals that some cases have multiple abusers. For many cases, the perpetrator is unknown.

Table 1: Distribution of Animal Cruelty Cases by Type of Abuse and Gender of Perpetrator for All *Convicted* Cases from www.Pet-Abuse.com website, August 1, 2004

Case category	Number of cases with only male perpetrators	Number of cases with both male and female perpetrators	Number of cases with only female perpetrators	Total number of cases
Beating	77	2	2	81
Bestiality	17	2	1	20
Burning/Caustic	0	1	0	1
Burning/Fireworks	17	1	1	19
Choking/strangling	1	0	0	1
Drowning	7	0	1	8
Fighting	45	7	1	53
Hanging	0	0	0	0
Hoarding	8	11	39	58
Kicking	0	0	0	0
Mutilation/torture	78	7	4	89
Neglect/abandonment	121	54	90	265
Other	15	0	4	19
Poison	7	0	0	7
Shooting	33	1	2	36
Stabbing	2	0	0	2
Theft	3	0	4	7
Throwing	9	0	2	11
Unclassified	17	0	5	22
Unlawful trade	3	1	0	4
Unlawful trapping	3	0	0	3
Vehicular	11 ²	0	3 ²	14
Total number cases	474	87	159	720

Gianotto is eager to collaborate with social scientists to make the website database more useful for research on animal cruelty. She also is working to obtain federal non-profit status to enable receiving contributions for her undertaking.

Data from www.Pet-Abuse.com: Gender and Animal Cruelty Convictions

In its current form, the Pet-Abuse.com database is easy to search but somewhat problematic for data analysis. The difficulty is generated by the missing data on gender and age for the cases in which the perpetrator is unknown. Nonetheless, the database still can be used to study animal cruelty. For this example, the problem of missing data was avoided by restricting analysis to cases in which there were convictions. For convictions, all perpetrator characteristics under consideration (gender and type of cruelty) are known.

Data for the current analysis on gender and type of cruelty are from all 720 cases that resulted in convictions and that were in the Pet-Abuse.com database on August 1, 2004. Table 1 presents all categories of abuse used by Pet-Abuse.com to categorize all cases on their website. It is readily obvious that there are many more categories than one typically finds in the behavioral science literature on abuse and cruelty. Table 1 breaks down the cases further by gender of the convicted abuser. Cases were divided according to the gender of the convicted perpetrator. Cases were classified as only male perpetrators, only female perpetrators, and cases with at least one male and one female perpetrator.

Obviously cases with both male and female perpetrators have two or more abusers, cases in the only male or only female columns may have one or more perpetrators, but they are homogeneous for gender of perpetrator.

Table 2 presents collapsed conviction categories. These collapsed categories are more comparable to the typical categories of abuse and cruelty that appear in the behavioral science literature. The percentage of cases (67%) in which a convicted hoarder is female is similar to, but lower than, the 76% reported by Patronek (Kuehn, 2002) and the frequency of cases involving at least one female hoarder (86%) somewhat higher than what might be expected. It is important to keep in mind that these data represent cases, not necessarily individuals.

It is difficult to know exactly what to call the sample provided by the data from this website. It might be tempting to dismiss the cases as non-random and not worthy of analysis. Clearly it does not represent a random sample of abuse and cruelty cases. It is a form of convenience sample, and the ability to generalize from these data admittedly is suspect. However, because of self-report limitations, retrospective data, and

Table 2: Distribution of Animal Cruelty Cases by Type of Abuse and Gender of Perpetrator for All *Convicted* Cases from www.Pet-Abuse.com website, August 1, 2004 using Collapsed Categories of Abuse

Case category	Number of cases with only male perpetrators	Number of cases with both male and female perpetrators	Number of cases with only female perpetrators	Total number of cases
Bestiality	17	2	1	20
Fighting	45	7	1	53
Hoarding	8	11	39	58
Neglect/abandonment	121	54	90	265
Theft, Unlawful Trade, and Unlawful Trapping	9	1	4	14
All other cases . . .				
Beating, Mutilation/ Torture, Shooting, etc.	274	12	24	310
Total number cases	474	87	159	720

representativeness of populations sampled, valid real world data for animal abuse and cruelty are difficult to obtain. Rather than dismissing the Pet-Abuse.com data, we should give them serious consideration. They are a large sample of real cases; at this point, there is no known systematic bias in the sample.

For all categories of abuse except Neglect/abandonment the gender distributions from the Pet-Abuse.com database and other published literature are similar. This suggests that the Pet-Abuse.com sample is fairly representative of other data collected in the field. If this argument is correct, then it becomes important to look at the considerable frequency of the total number of convicted cases that are neglect and abandonment cases (36.8%) and the sizable representation of female perpetrators in that category—one-third of the cases have only female perpetrators, and more than half the cases have at least one female perpetrator.

Data have not yet been reported, as far as I am aware, that identify females as so clearly contributing to animal suffering. Some possible explanations for why gender finding this has not previously appeared readily come to mind: Researchers may have

accepted the literature and not really looked at females as abusers; perhaps, because of cultural norms, females are less likely to self-report harming animals; and females may be more likely than are males to be held legally accountable by the courts for negligence on the part of their minor children. There probably are additional explanations including the possibility that upon further study this finding may not be replicated.

Conclusions

Pet-Abuse.com is a large and growing searchable database. A resource behavioral scientist can use it to contribute to the knowledge of animal abuse and cruelty.

Data from Pet-Abuse.com suggest that to understand and prevent animal cruelty, it is important to consider the relatively high frequency of Neglect and Abandonment cases and, in particular, to focus on the role of female perpetrators in this type of abuse. The Pet-Abuse.com database will become more useful in the future as awareness of the website increases and people regularly send cases to be added to the database.

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Notes

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- ² One case appeared in Pet-abuse.com as Anthony and was referred to as “he.” It was recoded by this author as a male case.

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