

Luis S. Spencer, Commissioner

**Childhood Animal Abuse and Violent Criminal Behavior:
A Brief Review of the Literature**

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The connection between cruelty to animals in childhood/early adolescence and adult violent criminal behavior has been a topic of interest for decades. Formal research on this matter began as early as the 1960s with Mead's 1964 bulletin article including her theory "that childhood animal cruelty was symptomatic of a violent personality that, if not diagnosed and targeted, could lead to 'a long career of episodic violence and murder'."¹ This phenomenon was also studied as part of a triad including enuresis (bed wetting) and fire setting in childhood by a number of researchers.² In the 1980s studies found that the association was not as significant as originally thought and triad research opened the way for the study of cruelty to animals as an independent indicator.³

The literature is abundant and runs the gambit of topics as there are many different aspects of both animal cruelty and later violent criminal behavior to be considered. Existing research looks at issues such as witnessing versus participating in animal cruelty;⁴ whether an animal is neglected, injured or killed; the method of abuse such as shooting, torture or bestiality; the age of the child at the inception of abuse; whether abuse is a single incident or reoccurring; and the motivations behind the abuse of animals. On the other side of the equation, different studies have looked at violent vs. non-violent criminal behavior; interpersonal vs. property or other crimes; and specific groups of offenses or offenders such as sex crimes, serial killers, the newer phenomenon of school violence (i.e. Columbine), and Domestic Violence.⁵

¹ Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

² MacDonald, J. M. (1963). The threat to kill. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 120, 125-130; Hellman, D. S., & Blackman, N. (1966). Enuresis, fire setting, and cruelty to animals: A triad predictive of adult crime. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 122, 1431-1435; and Wax, D., & Haddox, V. (1974). Enuresis, fire setting, and animal cruelty in male adolescent delinquents: A triad predictive of violent behavior. *Journal of Psychiatric Law*, 2(1), 45-72 in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

³ Heath, G. A., Hardesty, V. A., & Goldfine, P. E. (1984). Fire setting, enuresis, and animal cruelty. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 1, 97-100 and Felthous, A. R., & Kellert, S. R. (1986). Violence against animals and people: Is aggression against living creatures generalized? *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, 14(1), 55-69 in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

⁴ Animal Alternatives in Education: The Link between Human Violence and Animal Cruelty, The National Anti-Vivisection Society, at http://www.navs.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ain_edu_link_violence_cruelty (last visited July 3, 2007) and Daugherty, P.M. (February 24, 2005). Animal abusers may be warming up for more at <http://www.lacp.org/2005-Articles-Main/LAPDs DedicatedAnimalCrueltyUnit.html> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

⁵ Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

“The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) considers past animal abuse when profiling serial killers.”⁶ According to Robert K. Ressler, who developed profiles of serial killers for the FBI, “Murderers...very often start out by killing and torturing animals as kids.”⁷ “FBI criminal profiler, John Douglas, writes in *The Mind Hunter* that serial offenders’ earliest acts of violence are often the torture and/or killing of pets or wildlife, then brutalizing younger siblings, and then finally engaging in domestic violence or street crime.”⁸

“The deadly violence that has occurred in schools in recent years has, in most cases, begun with cruelty to animals.”⁹ “Many of the school shooters committed acts of animal cruelty before turning their aggression on classmates, teachers, and parents.”¹⁰

There are also different cohorts to be studied and methods of research to be used. The majority of studies have focused on retrospective accounts comparing violent and non-violent criminal populations¹¹ (Felthous & Yudowitz, 1977; Hellman & Blackman, 1966; Kellert & Felthous, 1985), but others have compared criminals to college students, surveyed college students alone, or looked at more clinical settings with mentally ill subjects. A different spin on the subject matter focuses on the behavior of children comparing those in clinical and not clinical settings by either relying on parental reporting or assessments and interviews with the children directly.

“The earliest study to report the prevalence of animal cruelty in a male prisoner population was conducted by Hellman and Blackman (1966).¹² These authors found that prisoners charged with a violent crime were three times as likely to report an incident of animal cruelty having occurred in their childhood compared to prisoners charged with nonviolent crimes.”¹³

⁶ The Animal Abuse-Human Violence Link, Progressive Animal Welfare Society, at <http://www.paws.org/help/report/connection.php> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

⁷ Animal Abuse and Human Abuse: Partners in Crime, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, at <http://www.helpinganimals.com/Factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=18> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

⁸ *Why You Should Join The War On Animal Cruelty*, Coalition for Animal Justice, at <http://www.animal-justice.org/involved.html> (last viewed at June 29, 2007)) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Randour, *What We Know About the Link, Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*, at http://www.animalsvoice.com/PAGES/writes/editorial/features/link/randour_link.html in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

¹¹ Felthous, A. R., & Yudowitz, B. (1977). Approaching a comparative typology of assaultive female offenders. *Psychiatry*, 40, 270-276; Hellman, D. S., & Blackman, N. (1966). Enuresis, fire setting, and cruelty to animals: A triad predictive of adult crime. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 122, 1431-1435; Kellert, S. R., & Felthous, A. R. (1985). Childhood cruelty toward animals among criminals and noncriminals. *Human Relations*, 38, 1113-1129 in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

¹² Hellman, D. S., & Blackman, N. (1966). Enuresis, fire setting, and cruelty to animals: A triad predictive of adult crime. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 122, 1431-1435.

¹³ Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

Although there are opposing studies out there, a growing body of research does indicate people who commit acts of cruelty towards animals rarely stop there.¹⁴ The commission of these acts can be a warning sign of future violent behavior, and may predict later violence towards people. It is noteworthy that “child protection and social service agencies, mental health professionals, and educators regard animal abuse as a significant form of aggressive and antisocial behavior to the point that it is considered an important red flag in the identification of other violent behavior”.¹⁵ “Psychology, sociology, and criminology studies have shown that many violent offenders had committed repeated acts of serious animal cruelty during childhood and adolescence.”¹⁶ In fact, violent criminals were found to be five times more likely to commit violent crimes against people if they had a history of abusing animals in their youth.¹⁷ “There is a further correlation: the most aggressive criminals had committed the most severe acts of animal cruelty in childhood.”¹⁸ [24]

The following statistics from various studies demonstrate the link between animal abuse and violence towards human beings:

- 70% of all animal abusers have committed at least one other criminal offense and almost 40% have committed violent crimes against people.¹⁹
- A survey of 117 male inmates incarcerated in a South African prison, found that 63.3% (58) of men who had committed crimes of aggression admitted to cruelty to animals while only 10.5% (59) of the nonaggressive inmates admitted to this.²⁰
- A comparison study of undergraduate students and incarcerated felons found that 63% of inmates and 20.5% of undergraduates reported abusing animals. The majority of exposure occurred between 6 and 12 years of age.²¹

¹⁴ The Animal Abuse-Human Violence Link, Progressive Animal Welfare Society, at <http://www.paws.org/help/report/connection.php> (last visited June 27, 2007) and Animal Abuse and Human Abuse: Partners in Crime, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, at <http://www.helpinganimals.com/Factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=18> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

¹⁵ The Animal Abuse-Human Violence Link, Progressive Animal Welfare Society, at <http://www.paws.org/help/report/connection.php> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

¹⁶ Susan I. Finkelstein, Canary in a Coal Mine: The Connection Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence, Penn Veterinary Medicine, at <http://www.vet.upenn.edu/schoolresources/communications/publications/bellwether/58/connection.html> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

¹⁷ Robert Price, Cruelty to animals may lead to child abuse, KHAS-TV, at <http://khastv.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=9304> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

¹⁸ Randour, *What We Know About the Link, Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*, at http://www.animalsvoice.com/PAGES/writes/editorial/features/link/randour_link.html in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

¹⁹ The Animal Abuse-Human Violence Link, Progressive Animal Welfare Society, at <http://www.paws.org/help/report/connection.php> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

²⁰ Schiff, K., Louw, D., and Ascione, F.R. 1999. Animal relations in childhood and later violent behavior against humans. *Acta Criminologica* 12:77–86 in Ascione, F.R. (September 2001). Animal Abuse and Youth Violence. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

- A 1986 study of 64 convicted male sex offenders, found that 48% of rapists and 30% of child molesters reported committing animal abuse during childhood or adolescence;²²
- A 1988 retrospective study reported that 46% rapists began abusing animals during adolescence, while 36% began as children;²³
- A 1977 article published in *Psychiatry* found that 36% of assaultive women reported cruelty to animals while 0% of non-assaultive women did;²⁴
- Kellert and Felthous found in a 1985 study that 25% of violent, incarcerated men reported higher rates of “substantial cruelty to animals” in childhood than a comparison group of non-incarcerated men (0%);²⁵ and
- Men who abused animals were five times more likely to have been arrested for violence towards humans, four times more likely to have committed property crimes, and three times more likely to have records for drug and disorderly conduct offenses.²⁶

In recent years, a strong connection has been made between animal abuse and domestic violence.²⁷ In fact, cruelty to animals is considered to be a significant predictor of future domestic violence.²⁸ Because abusers target the powerless, crimes against animals, spouses, children, and the elderly often go hand in hand.²⁹

²¹ Miller, K. S., & Knutson, J. F. (1997). Reports of severe physical punishment and exposure to animal cruelty by inmates convicted of felonies and by university students. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 21(1), 59-82 in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). *Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues*. The Forensic Examiner, 14(2), 23-32.

²² Tingle, D., Barnard, G. W., Robbins, G., Newman, G., & Hutchinson, D. (1986). Childhood and adolescent characteristics of pedophiles and rapists. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 9, 103-116 in Ascione, F.R. (September 2001). *Animal Abuse and Youth Violence*. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

²³ Ressler, R. K., Burgess, A. W., & Douglas, J. E. (1988). *Sexual homicide. Patterns and motives*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). *Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues*. The Forensic Examiner, 14(2), 23-32.

²⁴ Felthous, A. R., & Yudowitz, B. (1977). Approaching a comparative typology of assaultive female offenders. *Psychiatry*, 40, 270-276 in Ascione, F.R. (September 2001). *Animal Abuse and Youth Violence*. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

²⁵ Kellert, S. R., & Felthous, A. R. (1985). Childhood cruelty toward animals among criminals and noncriminals. *Human Relations*, 38, 1113-1129 in Ascione, F.R. (September 2001). *Animal Abuse and Youth Violence*. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

²⁶ Randour, *What We Know About the Link, Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*, at http://www.animalsvoice.com/PAGES/writes/editorial/features/link/randour_link.html in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

²⁷ *Animal Cruelty/Human Violence: The Link*, at <http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?cls=0&cat=1495&articleid=3120>) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

²⁸ *Animal abuse predictor of domestic violence*, at <http://www.chronicleforums.com/Forum/showthread.php?p=2448275#post2448275> in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

²⁹ *Animal Abuse and Human Abuse: Partners in Crime, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, at <http://www.helpinganimals.com/Factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=18> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

- 85% of women and 63% of children entering shelters discussed incidents of pet abuse in the family;³⁰
- More than 80% of families being treated for child abuse were also involved in animal abuse;³¹
- 70.3% of women in domestic abuse shelters reported either threats or actual harm to pets, with 54% reporting actual harm;³²
- 32% of pet-owning victims of domestic abuse reported that one or more of their children had hurt or killed a pet;³³ and
- Approximately 25% of the battered women reported that concern for their pets' welfare had prevented them from seeking shelter sooner.³⁴

This brief summary is only a small cross section of the literature available on the topic of animal cruelty in childhood/early adolescence as linked to adult criminal behavior. Research continues to explore this subject matter delving into all aspects in an effort to establish tools to identify those with a high risk and to provide early intervention and treatment when possible. There are currently a number of interventions available for youngsters to address animal cruelty although there is a need for research regarding the efficacy of these programs.³⁵ These treatment programs have a range of goals relevant to children and young adults which include³⁶:

- enhanced capacity to form positive relationships with others
- increased feelings of self-worth
- increased personal competence and mastery
- increased empathy (for children and young people who are assessed as lacking empathy)
- a reduction in anxiety

³⁰ *Animal Cruelty/Domestic Violence Fact Sheet*, The Humane Society of the United States, at http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/first_strike_the_connection_between_animal_cruelty_and_human_violence/animal_cruelty_and_family_violence_making_the_connection/animal_crueltydomestic_violence_fact_sheet.html (last viewed June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

³¹ *The Animal Abuse-Human Violence Link*, Progressive Animal Welfare Society, at <http://www.paws.org/help/report/connection.php> (last visited June 27, 2007) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

³² *Animal Cruelty/Human Violence: The Link*, at <http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?cls=0&cat=1495&articleid=3120>) in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

³³ *Animal Cruelty and Family Violence: Making the Connection*, The Humane Society of the United States, at http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/first_strike_the_connection_between_animal_cruelty_and_human_violence/animal_cruelty_and_family_violence_making_the_connection/ in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

³⁴ *Animal Abuse and Violent Offending*, at http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/jjbul2001_9_2/page7.html in Hodges, C. (2008). *The Link: Cruelty to Animals and Violence Towards People* at http://www.cyntiahodges.com/animals/pages/animals_human_volence.pdf (last visited October 17, 2011).

³⁵ Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Society and animals forum. Retrieved 1 May 2005 from <http://www.psyeta.org> in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

³⁶ *Animal Assisted Therapy and Young People: A Review of Selected Literature*. (2003). Prepared for Menzies Inc. by RHMSS Pty Ltd. at <http://www.menzies.org.au/Uploads/Animal-Assisted-Therapy-Report.pdf> . (last visited October 24, 2011).

- reduced depression
- reduced anti-social behaviour

Some of the programs available include AniCare Child, a cognitive behavioral intervention based on techniques to treat batterers developed by the Doris Day Animal foundation and PSYETA. The focus is on juvenile animal cruelty behavior including witnesses to animal abuse. “Children are taught how to connect to animals and express their emotions appropriately” as well as “acknowledging the accountability of their behavior”.³⁷

Other interventions focus on a child’s social development such as “humane education treatment” which helps enhance understanding of and attitudes about animals through the teaching of the basic concepts of animal care and welfare in a classroom setting.³⁸ The People and Animals Learning (PAL) program,³⁹ a three-week program for inner city at-risk youth aged 10 to 13, teaches respect for animals in addition to responsibility, accountability, and respect for self and others. (This program was not designed specifically to be an intervention for those who are cruel to animals.) Green Chimneys is a program that is a year-round home school and farm designed for aggressive children.⁴⁰ “Children who have been cruel to animals are taught humane practices for caring for animals and they learn how to describe their feelings while working with animals, discuss their anger, and build empathy”. “The program has been successful in targeting and working with aggression toward animals.”⁴¹

The programs above and others like them are a promising alternative in treating children who abuse animals. As noted, treatment outcome studies should be used to determine what types of interventions are effective in decreasing animal abuse among children to achieve the best results.⁴²

³⁷ Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

³⁸ Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

³⁹ De Grave, J. (1999). People and animals learning: The PAL Program. In F. R. Ascione & P. Arkow, (Eds.), *Child abuse, domestic violence, and animal abuse: Linking the circles of compassion for prevention and intervention* (pp. 410-423). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

⁴⁰ Ross Jr., S. B. (1999). Green chimneys: We give troubled children the gift of giving. In E. R. Ascione & P. Arkow (Eds.), *Child abuse, domestic violence, and animal abuse: Linking the circles of compassion for prevention and intervention* (pp. 367-379). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

⁴¹ Ascione, F. R., Kaufmann, M. E., & Brooks, S. M. (2000). Animal abuse and developmental psychopathology: Recent research, programmatic, and therapeutic issues and challenges for the future. In A. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (pp. 325-354). San Diego, CA: Academic Press in Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

⁴² Haden, S.C., & Scarpa, A. (2005). Childhood animal cruelty: A review of research, assessment, and therapeutic issues. *The Forensic Examiner*, 14(2), 23-32.

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