

People have more empathy for battered dogs than human adult, but not child, victims

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People have more empathy for battered puppies and full grown dogs than they do for some humans—adults, but not children, finds new research to be presented at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"Contrary to popular thinking, we are not necessarily more disturbed by animal rather than human suffering," said Jack Levin, the Irving and Betty Brudnick Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Northeastern University. "Our results indicate a much more complex situation with respect to the age and species of [victims](#), with age being the more important component. The fact that adult human [crime victims](#) receive less [empathy](#) than do child, puppy, and full grown dog victims suggests that adult dogs are regarded as dependent and vulnerable not unlike their younger canine counterparts and kids."

In their study, Levin and co-author Arnold Arluke, a sociology professor at Northeastern University, considered the opinions of 240 men and women, most of whom were white and between the ages of 18-25, at a large northeastern university. Participants randomly received one of four fictional news articles about the beating of a one-year-old child, an adult in his thirties, a puppy, or a 6-year-old dog. The stories were identical except for the victim's identify. After reading their story, respondents were asked to rate their feelings of empathy towards the victim.

"We were surprised by the interaction of age and species," Levin said. "Age seems to trump species, when it comes to eliciting empathy. In

addition, it appears that adult humans are viewed as capable of protecting themselves while full grown dogs are just seen as larger puppies."

Interestingly, the researchers found that the difference in empathy for children versus [puppies](#) was statistically non-significant.

As for considering the opinions of 240 college students, Levin said it is common practice to use homogenous samples for studies such as his that center around an experiment. "Unlike survey research, experiments usually employ a homogenous sample in order to establish a cause and effect relationship rather than to generalize a large population," Levin said. "However, there is really no reason to believe that our results would differ very much nationally, particularly among college students."

While the study focused on dogs and humans, Levin thinks the findings would be similar for cats and people as well. "Dogs and cats are family pets," he said. "These are animals to which many individuals attribute human characteristics."

More information: The paper, "Are People More Disturbed by Animal or Human Suffering? Assessing the Influence of Victim's Species and Age on Empathy," will be presented on Saturday, Aug. 10, at 8:30 a.m. EDT in New York City at the American Sociological Association's 108th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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