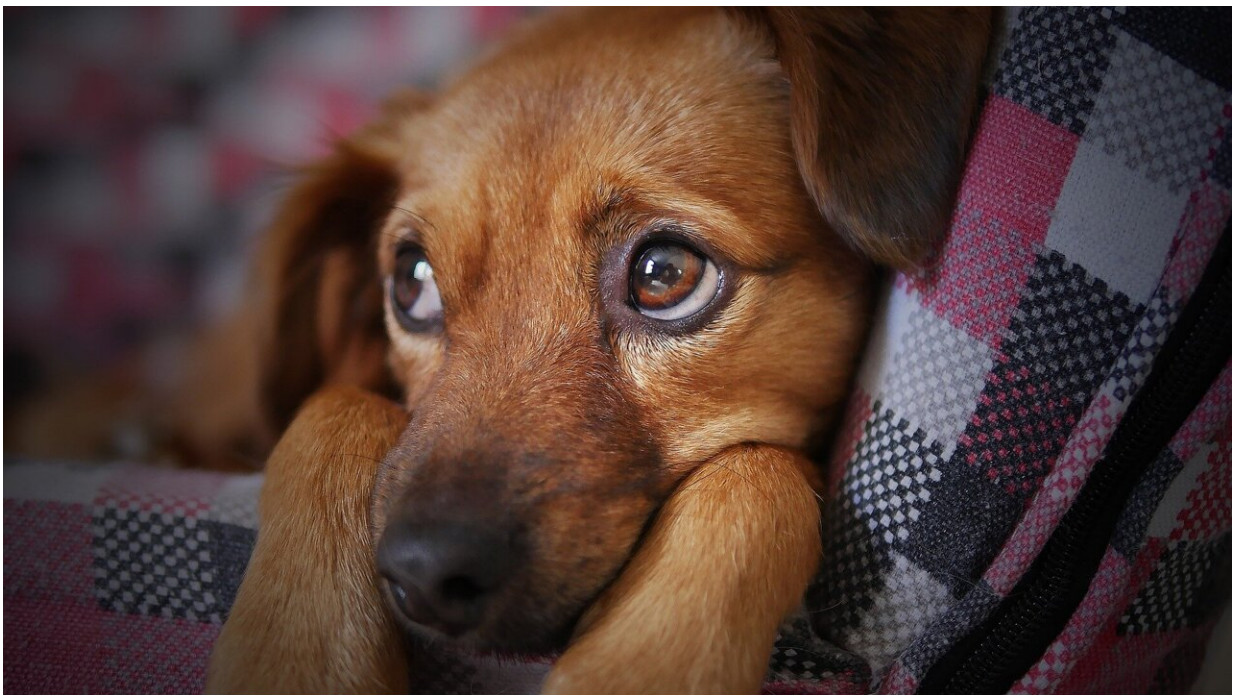


In domestic violence cases, police are more likely to make arrests when pets are abused too

August 27 2024, by Lynn Addington



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Nearly two-thirds of U.S. households have at least [one pet](#), and almost all see their pet as a [family member](#).

Unfortunately, in homes where violence occurs, pets can also be victims

of this harm. [Research studies](#) consistently support [the link](#) between [animal cruelty](#) and [interpersonal violence](#).

The link with intimate partner violence, which is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [as abuse or aggression by a current or former spouse or dating partner](#), extends this connection. Animal cruelty is not only a recognized factor that predicts harming an intimate partner, but it can be used to perpetrate this violence.

Animal cruelty is weaponized when an intimate partner threatens to harm, or actually harms, a pet to control their partner. This tactic is powerful. [Victims of intimate partner violence](#) regularly cite fear for the safety of their pet as a primary reason they do not leave an abusive situation.

Advocacy groups have used evidence of the link with intimate partner violence to propose [policy changes](#) to protect humans and their [companion animals](#) who are at risk for harm by an intimate partner. Based on these efforts, [40 state legislatures](#) have enacted laws that expand the coverage of protective orders, which are [court orders that legally prevent or limit contact by the abuser](#), to include pets within the scope of those who are protected.

State legislatures also have included evidence of animal abuse in efforts to protect people. [Extreme-risk protection orders](#) or "red flag" laws allow the temporary removal of firearms from a dangerous situation where someone might hurt themselves or others. At least four states—[Colorado](#), [Connecticut](#), [New Jersey](#) and [Oregon](#)—specifically list a history of animal cruelty as one reason an extreme-risk protection order could be issued.

At the federal level, Congress passed the [Pet and Women Safety—or PAWS—Act](#) to fund emergency housing for people and their pets who

are escaping intimate partner violence. In 2022, Congress increased the budget for this program to [US\\$3 million](#).

Despite these policies to protect animal and human victims of intimate partner violence, we know little about these cases in terms of whether the police are called or any arrests are made.

[Only about half of intimate partner violence cases](#)—whether they involve animal cruelty or not—are reported to the police.

Victims of intimate partner violence have many reasons for not contacting police. Some are concerned the police won't believe them or won't be able to stop the violence. Others are financially dependent on their abuser or think it is a private matter that doesn't involve police.

'Intentional cruelty,' not neglect

[I am a criminologist who has studied victims of violent crime](#), including intimate partner violence, for over two decades. To explore these cases of intimate partner violence and animal cruelty that involve police, [my colleague, psychologist Mary Lou Randour, and I analyzed](#) newly available data from the FBI. The FBI collects details on over 50 types of crime from [police departments](#) across the United States and recently added [animal cruelty to this list of crimes](#).

We used this data to look at intimate partner violence that occurred alongside animal cruelty. In such cases, almost [85% of animal cruelty](#) involved intentional cruelty rather than neglect. This finding is consistent with abusers weaponizing violence against pets to control their partner.

We also compared two groups of intimate partner violence incidents where police were called. One group involved intimate partner violence and animal cruelty. The second group included intimate partner violence

and another type of crime, such as arson, vandalism or motor vehicle theft.

Both groups of cases shared similar characteristics. For example, over [two-thirds of the cases](#) involved current dating partners as compared with current spouses or former partners. In addition, most cases involved [female victims](#) with male perpetrators.

[Arrests were the main difference](#) between the two groups. Nearly two-thirds of intimate partner violence incidents involving animal cruelty ended with an arrest, as compared with just over half of intimate partner violence occurring with another crime.

Understanding this nearly 10 percentage-point difference in arrests when animal cruelty is present is important.

Arrests can serve essential functions, including immediately removing a dangerous, violent perpetrator from the situation. Arrests also provide a record of evidence of a pattern of violence for interventions such as [danger risk assessments](#). Danger risk assessments consist of a series of questions, which are used by [health care professionals](#), advocates and [law enforcement](#) to identify victims at the highest risk for fatal, or near-fatal, intimate partner violence and direct them to immediate services and safety.

Expand laws to include pets

While our data does not allow us to explain this pattern, we can suggest two ways animal cruelty might affect the decision to arrest.

Intimate partner violence victims may be more likely to demand an arrest if their pet is harmed or threatened, as compared with other situations. Incidents involving violence against a partner and a pet may

also prompt an arrest due to their nature. [Previous research](#) indicates intimate partner violence that occurs with animal cruelty involves more serious violence than other cases.

Our work reiterates the importance of laws that expanded intimate partner violence protections to include pets. It also highlights the important opportunity for police officers who are called to these incidents to connect victims with services. To effectively support victims and their pets, police need to be educated on available pet-inclusive services, including pet-friendly shelter options.

In addition, our work identifies the need to encourage collaboration between police and humane law enforcement. Humane law enforcement officers are first responders for animal cruelty situations. Just as police may discover animal cruelty when responding to [intimate partner violence](#), humane law enforcement may uncover evidence of interpersonal violence. Established partnerships across police and humane law enforcement departments can ensure the safety for both human and animal victims.

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