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Nicola Taylor & Tania D. Signal
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Community Demographics and the Propensity to Report Animal Cruelty

Nicola Taylor and Tania D. Signal

School of Psychology and Sociology
Central Queensland University

The last decade has seen an increased awareness concerning links between violence to nonhuman animals and violence to humans. This has resulted in a number of cross-reporting initiatives between family service providers and animal welfare organizations. The success of these initiatives rests on individuals being willing to report such violence. Thus, there is a need to determine which variables influence an individual’s willingness to report deliberate animal cruelty and abuse. The aim of this study was to examine demographic and attitudinal variables to ascertain their impact on propensity to report deliberate animal harm. A telephone questionnaire resulted in 1,208 valid responses from members of the general community. Results showed a number of variables that affected the propensity to report: gender, occupation, and acknowledgment of the link between family violence and deliberate animal harm. This article discusses these variables and their implications.

There has been a proliferation of interest during the last decade in the potential links between cruelty to nonhuman animals and violence and aggression toward humans. Research suggests that there is a link between antisocial behavior, violence, and aggression toward humans and deliberate harm to animals (Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999). In particular, there has been much interest and research into links between domestic violence, child abuse, and deliberate harm to companion animals (Flynn, 2000). Such links need to be taken seriously on both human and animal welfare levels. Both the academic community (Ascione,
2001; Taylor & Signal, 2004, 2005) and the service provision and policymaking community have taken an interest in these links (Becker & French, 2004). This interest is now turning to an assessment of the feasibility of interagency cooperative models, whereby family and children’s services and animal cruelty prevention services work together in a cross-reporting capacity to investigate both human and animal cruelty. These initiatives are based on recognition of the link between human and animal abuse and are aimed at improving both animal and human welfare. However, little information is available concerning whether, and under what circumstances, individuals are willing to report deliberate animal harm and what kinds of variables affect their propensity and willingness to report animal abuse.

As awareness increases concerning links between violence to animals and violence to humans and as more cross-reporting initiatives are being advocated and established, a need remains to determine which variables influence an individual’s willingness to report deliberate animal cruelty or abuse. Moreover, there is a need to assess these variables in a normative community sample to provide a benchmark against which other communities may be gauged. Information such as this can be used when considering whether, and how, to target specific groups to raise awareness concerning animal cruelty. Although a small, but growing, amount of information is available concerning the variables that affect attitudes toward the treatment of animals (Matthews & Herzog, 1997; Signal & Taylor, 2006; Taylor & Signal, 2005), little empirical evidence exists on the variables that affect willingness to acknowledge and report animal cruelty.

Factors known to affect individuals’ attitudes toward animals include the following:

2. Experience of companion animals both as a child and an adult (Paul & Serpell, 1993; Taylor & Signal, 2005).
3. Age, income, and educational level (Kellert, 1980).
5. Ethical ideology (Galvin & Herzog, 1992).
7. Race and the respondent’s place of residence in a rural or urban environment (Kellert, 1980).

Similarly, factors known to affect an individual’s willingness to report nonanimal-specific crime include situational or attitudinal factors: (a) type and seriousness of the crime, (b) financial loss, (c) presence or absence of witnesses (Bachman & Coker, 1995; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001; Kury, Teske, & Wurger, 1999), and (d) distrust of law enforcement agencies and fear of community retaliation (Kidd & Chayet, 1984). Beyond this, little variation in willingness to re-
port crime has been found, according to specific demographic characteristics (Davis & Henderson, 2003).

However, it is not reasonable to expect that the same factors that influence attitudes toward animals or willingness to report crime generally will necessarily influence an individual’s propensity to report animal cruelty or abuse. Thus, this exploratory study sought to assess the existence and significance of particular demographic variables that might affect the propensity to report animal abuse. Demographics shown to affect attitudes toward animals in previous research were taken as the starting point for this study (Herzog et al., 1991; Kellert, 1980; Signal & Taylor, 2006). Thus, the following were examined:

1. Gender, age, employment status, and occupation type.
2. Income and education level.
3. Religious and political beliefs.
4. Presence of a child in the dwelling.
5. The respondent’s place of residence in a city, town, or rural community.
6. The length of time spent within this community.

In addition, these demographics were further analyzed for interaction effects with gender, as previous research into the attitudes toward the treatment of animals has consistently demonstrated a gender effect (Herzog et al., 1991; Signal & Taylor, 2006).

METHOD

Participants

A telephone survey was administered by the Centre for Social Science Research at Central Queensland University to a random sample of 3,090 adults over the age of 18 who were residing in central Queensland at the time. The survey resulted in a sample of 1,208 valid responses from 602 men and 606 women, with ages ranging from 18 to 85, with an average age of 47, equaling a response rate of 39%.

Apparatus

As part of the annual Central Queensland Social Survey (CQSS), researchers were invited to contribute up to 10 questions that reflected their research interests. The survey instrument therefore consisted of three components: a standardized introduction, demographics, and researcher-contributed questions. The demographic questions included the following:
1. Gender.
2. Age.
3. Marital status.
5. Length of time living in the current community.
6. Income.
7. Political beliefs.
8. The respondent’s place of residence in a town, city, or rural area.
9. Occupation status (full-time or part-time employment).

Further demographic information regarding the following was also collected: (a) education level (primary, secondary, tertiary–technical, tertiary–university) and (b) current occupation (coded using major categories listed within an online job search engine; SEEK [www.seek.com.au]). This resulted in five categories:

1. Primary industries.
2. Education.
3. Health care.
4. White collar.
5. Blue collar and other.

In this case, the researcher-directed questions required respondents to indicate on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (definitely would) their propensity to report an incident of violence involving a companion animal: “If you became aware of an incident/incidences of family violence with an ANIMAL victim how likely would you be to report it?” Respondents were also asked to whom they would report this, with no precoded options offered. This was a deliberate part of the research design, as one of the key issues deemed of interest was the number of respondents who would reply, “Don’t know.” Finally, respondents were asked, “Do you think there is a link between family violence and deliberate animal harm?”

Procedure

The 2005 CQSS sample was drawn from a telephone database using a computer program to select—with replacement—a simple, random sample of phone numbers within the region. All duplicate, mobile, and business numbers were purged from the computer-generated list. Nursing homes and other collective dwellings such as youth hostels were also deleted from the sample. Within the household, one person was selected—based on gender and age—as the respondent for the 20-min interview.
RESULTS

The data were entered into SPSS for Windows (Version 13); data cleaning and consistency checks were performed, resulting in 1,208 cases.

Ten demographic variables were found to have a nonsignificant (main) effect on respondents’ propensity to report an incident of violence toward an animal:

1. Age, $F(5, 1197) = 0.570, p = .723$.
2. Education, $F(3, 1191) = 0.207, p = .892$.
3. Political affiliation, $F(11, 1207) = 0.826, p = .614$.
5. Employment status, $F(4, 1187) = 0.911, p = .457$.
6. Personal and household income levels, $F(18, 1207) = 0.944, p = .525; F(3, 848) = 0.500, p = .682$, respectively.
7. Presence of child in the dwelling, $t(1,206) = 0.368, p = .713$.
8. Whether the respondent currently resided in a city, town, or rural area, $F(2, 1197) = 1.443, p = .237$.

This latter variable approached significance with those currently working within the primary industry sector (farming and agriculture) having the lowest propensity to report animal abuse (3.91) compared to those within the white collar and education categories, demonstrating the highest propensity to report (4.32 and 4.31, respectively).

Although the preceding variables were found to have no significant (main) effect on propensity to report, some interaction effects with gender were apparent, indeed was the effect of gender alone. Although both genders indicated a willingness to report incidents of violence toward animals (female = 4.40, male = 4.06), men were comparatively less likely to report such an incident. This difference was significant at the .000 level, $t(1,164) = -6.212$. The interaction between employment status (employed, unemployed, student, at home, or pensioner) and gender proved to be significant, $F(4, 1178) = 5.473, p = .000$, but variable, with men indicating substantially higher propensities to report animal-related violence within the student and at-home categories than were women within the same categories. However, it must be noted that the number of respondents within these categories (men at home) was small. Potentially of more interest, in light of previous research, was the significant interaction between gender and occupation type on the propensity to report animal abuse, $F(5, 785) = 2.926, p = .013$. Overall, women tended to present with a higher propensity to report animal abuse than did their male counterparts—regardless of occupation categories (blue collar, white collar, education, and health care); in most cases, however, the disparity was not remarkable. In contrast, the largest disparity in
propensity to report by gender and occupation type was found within the primary industry category with men scoring substantially lower than women within the same category (3.65 and 4.64, respectively).

Participants were also asked to whom they would report an incident of animal harm. Categories were collated from the original responses gathered without precoding, resulting in the following five categories:

1. Don’t know ($n = 68$).
2. Police ($n = 210$).
3. RSPCA ($n = 865$).
4. Personal intervention ($n = 20$).
5. Other ($n = 45$).

The category “Other” included responses such as reporting to a local veterinarian or city council. However, none of these had a frequency of more than 10, hence the reason they were collapsed into one category. Figure 1 presents the interaction between the self-identified propensity to report animal abuse and to whom the respondent would report it.

As can be seen in Figure 1, those who answered, “Don’t know” have substantially lower propensities to report, followed by those who advocate “personal intervention.” The interaction between choice of to whom to report and the propensity to report was significant, $F(4, 1207) = 35.785, p = .000$. Post-hoc analyses (Tukey’s honestly significant difference) showed that those who responded “Don’t know” or “personal intervention” had significantly lower propensities to report than did those who responded “police” or “RSPCA.” Further analyses deter-

![FIGURE 1](image)

**FIGURE 1** Average propensity to report deliberate animal abuse as a function of to whom the participant would report such an incident.
mined that there was no significant interaction between gender and to whom to report on propensity to report animal abuse, $F(4, 1197) = 1.661, p = .157$.

When respondents were asked whether they thought that there was a link between family violence and deliberate animal harm, approximately 63% ($n = 773$) said “yes.” A significant interaction was found between this variable and the related propensity to report animal cruelty, $F(2, 1207) = 6.441, p = .002$, in that those who replied “no” were significantly less likely to report animal abuse. Further analyses determined there was no significant interaction between an individual’s gender, the thought that there was a link, and that individual’s propensity to report, $F(1, 1198) = 0.231, p = .631$.

Investigation of the relation among the respondent-reported awareness of the link between family violence and deliberate animal cruelty, to whom they would report such incidences of abuse, and their overall propensity to report such acts revealed a significant interaction, $F(4, 1197) = 5.125, p = .000$. Examination of the data showed that those who were not aware of the link and did not know to whom to report such abuse demonstrated the lowest overall propensity to report. This group was followed closely by those who said “no” (to the link) and advocated personal intervention when an animal was being deliberately harmed. Those who thought there was a link and who indicated they would call the police to report deliberate harm to an animal showed the highest propensity to report.

**DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to explore and quantify some of the variables that may affect an individual’s propensity to report deliberate animal harm. Of the variables previously shown to influence attitude toward animals, the following were also shown to affect propensity to report: (a) gender, (b) employment status and occupation type by gender, (c) knowledge of to whom to report, and (d) awareness of the link between family violence and deliberate animal harm.

Although occupation type was not found to have the expected impact on propensity to report, it did approach significance with those working within primary industries showing the least likelihood to report. Furthermore, when gender was considered, this interaction between occupation sector and propensity to report became significant in that men working within primary industries were less likely to report deliberate animal harm than were either women or men in any other occupation. This may be due to an identified, functional, or pragmatic attitude toward animals. Kellert (1980)—in one of the few comprehensive investigations of attitudes to animals in the United States—reported that those working within primary industries (farmers and livestock producers) displayed a strong, utilitarian orientation toward animals. That is, they showed primary concern for the practical and material value of animals in conjunction with a comparative...
lack of concern for animal welfare and cruelty issues. Although this is not to suggest that those within the primary industry sector engage in—or condone—animal cruelty, it serves to indicate a subset of the population where increasing the awareness of the link between family violence and deliberate animal harm may also increase its propensity to report acts of deliberate animal harm.

In a similar vein, employment status became significant when examined in conjunction with gender, although it did not have a significant effect on propensity to report. Although the interaction was significant, the pattern of this interaction was mixed. This, combined with small sample numbers in certain categories (men at home), makes it difficult to determine the exact nature of the interaction. This lack of clarity is compounded by previous research that has found employment status to directly affect attitudes toward the treatment of animals. That is, those currently unemployed have been shown to have more positive, animal-welfare-oriented attitudes than those in employment (Signal & Taylor, 2006). This suggests an area in need of future research.

Gender proved to have a significant effect on an individual’s propensity to report animal abuse. This was expected due to, and is consistent with, previous research indicating that females score more highly on measures of attitudes toward the treatment of animals generally (Herzog et al., 1991). However, this remarkably consistent finding regarding gender did not extend to the interplay between individuals’ awareness of the link, knowledge of to whom to report acts of animal cruelty, and their propensity to report animal cruelty. That is, the effect of these two variables on an individual’s propensity to report was not significantly influenced by gender.

Approximately 6% of respondents indicated that they did not know to whom they would report acts of deliberate animal abuse, and a further 4% indicated that they would take some kind of inappropriate action (violent, personal intervention) totaling 10% of the respondents. In addition, results indicated that this group (those who do not know and those who would respond inappropriately) were much less likely to report deliberate animal cruelty overall than was any other group of respondents. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that should these individuals be given information concerning where to report such acts of cruelty, their concomitant propensity to report would increase.

Furthermore many respondents (17.2%, n = 210) indicated that they would report such acts to the police. However, it may well be that the police are not in a position to act on these reports due to financial constraints or competing priorities. Thus, at least 27% of the current sample reported that they did not know to whom to report deliberate animal abuse, would take personal (inappropriate) action, or would report it to agencies that may not be able to act on those reports. Again, this indicates a need for information dissemination to ensure that the public is aware of to whom it is best to report deliberate animal abuse.
In addition, an awareness of the link between family violence and deliberate animal harm seems to be one of the key variables in an individual’s propensity to report violence against animals. Regardless of all other demographic variables (including gender), those who do not think such a link exists show lower propensities to report violence to animals. That 36% of the current sample reported that they did not think this link existed suggests that a two-pronged approach that aims to increase community members’ awareness both of the link and of to whom to report such acts of violence generally may be the most effective way to increase propensity to report.

However, several limitations within this study must be acknowledged. First, the potential for social desirability bias within the respondents’ replies is high. The lowest propensities to report were not very much below 3 (neutral) on a scale of 1 to 5, which is unexpected in such a large sample. Second, the number of questions in the research area (not including demographics) was necessarily limited by the research design. That is, these questions were administered as part of a much larger survey beyond the researchers’ control. Both the number and the complexity of the questions were limited by this framework. Related to this was a third limitation in that questions needed to be both short and simply worded. Thus, there may have been some ambiguity in the phrasing of the questions. In particular, respondents were asked about family violence including an animal, which does not account for the nuances involved in defining what constitutes violence toward animals (neglect, deliberate harm) or, indeed, what constitutes family violence.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest a number of demographic and attitudinal variables that affect propensity to report deliberate animal harm. Foremost among these were knowledge of the link between family violence and animal abuse and knowledge of to whom to report acts of animal abuse. This suggests that any attempts to increase reporting of deliberate animal harm should be directed at increasing knowledge of such links and informing the public of appropriate responses to take if such acts are witnessed.

REFERENCES


