

---

## **Physical Cruelty Toward Animals in Massachusetts, 1975-1996**

**Arnold Arluke<sup>1</sup>**

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

**Carter Luke**

MASSACHUSETTS SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS

*This article describes the nature of animal abuse and the response of the criminal justice system to all cruelty cases prosecuted by the Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals between 1975 and 1996. Dogs were the most common target; when combined with cats, these domestic animals composed the vast majority of incidents. Almost all of these animals were owned, and females were the majority of complainants. Suspects were almost always young males, and most of the time they allegedly shot, beat, stabbed, or threw their victims. Reportedly, adults were more likely than minors to abuse dogs, shoot them, and commit such acts alone rather than in a group, while minors were more likely to abuse cats, beat them, and commit such acts with peers present. Less than half of the alleged abusers were found guilty in court, one-third were fined, less than one-quarter had to pay restitution, one-fifth were put on probation, one-tenth were sent to jail, and an even smaller percent were required to undergo counseling or perform community service.*

Criminal justice professionals, including police, district attorneys, judges, and criminologists do not appear to regard animal abuse as a serious or common crime. Statistics on criminal behavior rarely if ever include animal cruelty as a type of offense. For example, the often-cited FBI annual crime report makes no mention of animal cruelty (Department of Justice, 1996). Criminologists have largely ignored animal cruelty as a topic worthy of investigation. This year is the first time that an article about cruelty will be published in a criminology journal (Beirnes, 1997). And the courts have had a lax response to cruelty cases, according to animal welfare spokespersons (Wilensky, 1995).

---

At least four factors account for this apparent indifference. First, society in general attributes less value to animals than people. Second, there are serious human issues to address in the criminal justice system – such as homicide – that eclipse other concerns, including but not limited to animal cruelty, and reduce perceptions concerning their prevalence and seriousness. Third, it is easy to get the impression that animal cruelty is rare because only a small fraction of animal cruelty cases reach the press; for instance, of the 268 cruelty cases examined in this article, only 12 were reported in the press, representing about 5% of the total number of incidents studied. Moreover, those that were reported tended to be cases of bizarre cult or satanic abuse (e.g. Reuters, 1996), egregious sadistic abuse witnessed by the animal victim's owner (e.g. Hutchinson, 1994), animal abusing groups or gangs (e.g. Cullen, 1992), or interpersonal human violence where reports of animal abuse were incidental to the main story (e.g. Hayward, 1996). Finally, incidents of animal cruelty are viewed as isolated crimes having no relationship to other human behaviors such as interpersonal violence. Apparently, there has been little dissemination of studies of prisoners (Kellert & Felthous, 1985) and abusive domestic partners (Ascione, 1996) that suggest a correlation between cruelty and violent behavior.

The collection and reporting of descriptive statistics on animal cruelty would certainly help to mobilize interest among criminal justice professionals in this anti-social behavior. However, published, comprehensive, and detailed statistics are unavailable on animal abuse, with the exception of Vermeulen and Odendaal's (1993) analysis of 1863 abuse and neglect complaints received during one year by four South African SPCAs. Although their study provides a valuable typology of animal abuse, it leaves many basic questions unanswered regarding the background of reported abusers, the nature of their abuse, and the response of the criminal justice system to their acts. Moreover, comparable American data are needed to assess the generalizability of their findings across the Atlantic.

## **Results**

To investigate the nature and prevalence of physical cruelty toward animals in an American context, all complaints of abuse and neglect were reviewed from the records of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) between 1975 and 1996. These complaints included reports of neglect as well as cases of potential regulatory abuse (e.g., pet store infractions), organized abuse (e.g., dog fighting), legally-sanctioned abuse (e.g., self defense), intentional mental cruelty towards animals by individuals (e.g., depriving affection and

stimulation, causing anguish), and intentional physical cruelty towards animals by individuals (e.g., burning, poisoning, shooting, mutilating, drowning, suffocating), the last category being the focus of this study.

Between 1975 and 1996, there were approximately 80,000 complaints of abuse and neglect investigated by the MSPCA. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of such complaints. From 1980 to 1984, the MSPCA investigated 17,480 complaints of abuse and neglect. From 1985 to 1989, the number of these cases jumped to 20,698, or a 12.7% increase over the prior five-year period. And from 1990 to 1994, the number reached 27,587, or a 33.2% increase over the prior five-year period.

We anticipated a similar increase in the rate of physical cruelty toward animals by individuals, given the increased frequency in recent years of other kinds of violent crime (Gurr, 1989) such as domestic violence (Goetting, 1995). However, the number of physical cruelty cases prosecuted by the MSPCA has modestly declined in this period. From 1975 to 1985, there were 148 prosecuted cruelty cases, compared to 120 cases between 1986 and 1996, representing approximately 20% fewer cases.<sup>2</sup> These 268 prosecuted cases represent .3% of all cases of neglect and abuse that were investigated by the MSPCA during the time frame of this study.

It is important to recognize that more than 268 incidents of animal cruelty came to the attention of the MSPCA between 1975 and 1996. These 268 incidents only represent cases where prosecution was the chosen course of action. Cases were not prosecuted for one of two reasons. Either the identities of suspected abusers were unknown, making it impossible to prosecute, or there was insufficient evidence to go forward with prosecution.

Several factors may account for this decline in prosecuted cases. First, there may be fewer cases of physical cruelty to animals, although no evidence suggests this. Second, the nature of some types of animal cruelty may have changed, making it harder to investigate these cases. Third, the criminal justice system may be less sympathetic to animal crimes as it becomes increasingly bogged down with other crimes deemed more important to society. Finally, the MSPCA has changed its approach to animal cruelty cases, more often pursuing educational interventions than prosecution because the latter is costly, time consuming, and not necessarily effective.

### *Prosecuted Cruelty Incidents<sup>3</sup>*

As seen in Table 1, the vast majority of victims were dogs and cats (84.7%) in prosecuted cases. Dogs (57.8%) were the most commonly abused animals, fol-

lowed by cats (26.9%), and other animals (e.g., birds, wildlife, horses, farm animals – 15.3%). The vast majority of animal victims were owned (89.1%) rather than stray or wild. Most complainants (i.e., reporters of crime) were owners (48.5%), followed by anonymous or unknown complainants (24.6%), strangers (23.9%), and intimates/housemates (3%). Of the complainants who were not anonymous, females filed complaints in 41.8% of the incidents, male/female couples 36.6% of the time, and males in 21.6% of the cases.

**Table 1. Animal Victims**

Animal	Number	Percent
dogs	155	57.8
cats	72	26.9
wildlife	14	5.2
farm	8	3.0
birds	6	2.2
horses	3	1.1
other	10	3.7
Total	268	100

The prosecuted abusers were typically young males. There were 259 males (96.6%) and 9 females (3.4%). Moreover, two of the females were accomplices who did not directly touch or harm animals. Although their ages ranged from 9 to 83, most of the suspected abusers were young (mean = 30). Approximately 27% of them were adolescents (i.e., under 18 years), and 56% were under the age of 30.

While dogs were more likely than cats to be harmed regardless of the prosecuted abuser's age, adults were significantly more likely to abuse dogs than cats when compared with adolescents ( $\chi^2 14.88$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0006$ ). Approximately two-thirds (65%) of suspected adult abuse was directed at dogs, while slightly more than one-third (42%) of the adolescents' was. Alternatively, about half (51.2%) of all the adolescent cases involved cats, while this was true for adults in only 17.9% of the cases.

Several factors may account for why adolescent suspects were more likely than adults to abuse cats. General cultural ambivalence toward cats (Rhoades, 1981) may be perceived and exaggerated by adolescents. Also, compared to dogs, the size of cats may lead children to see them as easier or safer targets. And dogs are more likely than cats to be seen as "bad citizens" because of barking, defecating, or biting

(Perrin, 1988), so adults – whose prerogative it is to protect their families and property, as well as to maintain order in the neighborhood – may be more likely than adolescents to harm dogs.

In general, the results in Table 2 indicate that a few methods of abuse accounted for most of the cruelty cases. In more than half (58.6%) of the cases, animals were either shot or beaten; when combined with stabbing and throwing animals, these four methods accounted for three-quarters (75%) of the methods used by suspected abusers.

**Table 2. Methods of Cruelty**

Method	Number	Percent
beat	86	32.1
shoot	71	26.5
stab	29	10.8
throw	15	5.6
burn	10	3.7
ear/tail cut	9	3.4
strangle	9	3.4
drown	8	3.0
stone/crush	8	3.0
vehicular	8	3.0
dog attack	6	2.2
decapitate	5	1.9
bait	3	1.1
poison	2	0.7
castrate	2	0.7
hang	1	0.4
unknown	6	2.2
Total	268	100

Closer inspection of the two most common methods of abuse revealed some interesting differences. When only beating and shooting incidents were compared, adolescents (71.4%) were significantly more likely than adults (46.2%) to beat animals, and adults (53.8%) were significantly more likely than adolescents (28.6%) to shoot animals ( $\chi^2 = 14.67$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0006$ ).

There are two possible explanations for this difference. First, adults have greater access to firearms than do adolescents. Second, younger people are more

likely than older people to commit an expressive form of cruelty where the process of abuse is itself the sought after goal (Arluke, 1996). In such instances, mistreatment of animals is more important to abusers than achieving other goals such as retaliating against disliked owners. Compared to methods such as beating or strangling, remote methods of abuse such as shooting will be less appealing to the expressive abusers because they do not provide direct contact with victims.

The age of prosecuted abusers was also related to whether they acted alone or with others when committing abuse. When examined by age, younger suspects were significantly less likely than older ones to be alone when harming animals ( $\chi^2 = 31.81$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). While 87% of the adult suspects acted alone when harming animals, only about half (52%) of the adolescents did so.

The finding that only 13% of the adult suspects abused as part of a group, while approximately half of the adolescents did so, is consistent with reports of adolescent interpersonal violence. Levin and McDermitt (1994) claim that juveniles are especially likely to commit hate crimes – attacks against individuals or their property because they are seen as different due to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. These crimes are usually committed by groups of three to four boys who sincerely regard their victims as members of different species (e.g., the labelling of blacks as “primates”). Although animal cruelty by groups of adolescents has not been thought of as a hate crime, it may be useful for researchers to consider it as such. The dynamics driving groups of adolescents to harm animals may parallel the social and psychological forces behind hate crimes.

### *Adjudication*

Description of the nature and frequency of animal cruelty is necessary to understand this phenomenon and eventually reduce its occurrence. Although prevalence rates can be effected by such factors as changes in public awareness and reporting, the above data help to create a baseline by which physical cruelty can be compared with other populations or examined over time.

However, an equally important part of the cruelty picture is the response of the criminal justice system to animal abuse cases. Approximately half of the cases that were prosecuted lead to either guilty (44.4%) or not guilty (5.2%) decisions. The remaining complaints were dismissed (26.1%),<sup>4</sup> defaulted (4.4%),<sup>5</sup> denied (4.1%),<sup>6</sup> withdrawn (2.6%),<sup>7</sup> pursued by a police department (2.6%), continued (2.2%),<sup>8</sup> adjudicated as delinquent (2.2%),<sup>9</sup> or not sought (2.2%).<sup>10</sup> Disposition was unknown (2.9%) in a few cases.

Table 3. Sentences

Sentence	Number	Mean	Percent
fine	91	\$132	33
restitution	56	\$ 99	20
probation	59	5.5 mon	21
jail	28	4.5 mon	10
counseling	27	.....*	10
com. service	19	50 hours	7

\* Court ordered counseling was always an indeterminate length.

As indicated in Table 3, most of the court cases did not result in punishment.<sup>11</sup> When they did, fines were the most common punishment; they were ordered in 91 cases (33%) with a mean of \$132 per fine. Restitution was the next most common punishment, ordered in 56 of the cases (20%) with a mean of \$99. Usually, this restitution was to reimburse owners for veterinary costs and did not serve financially to punish abusers or award punitive damages to owners. Probation was ordered in 59 cases (21%), with a mean of 5.5 months of probation. Jail time was rarely served (10%), and the amount of time served was brief (mean = 4.5 months). When jail time was served, the abuse always involved domestic animals that were killed. Counseling was also rarely ordered (10%), as was community service (7%), the latter consisting of volunteer work in an animal shelter.

The total number of sentences noted above (280) exceeds the total number of suspected abusers found guilty. Two reasons account for this disparity: in some cases, individuals received more than one form of punishment and in other cases, judges ordered punishments even though individuals were not found guilty – a courtroom practice used by judges who believe that defendants are guilty but, for various reasons, do not want this verdict to appear in their records.

## Discussion

Overall, dogs were the most common target in prosecuted cases of physical cruelty; when combined with cats, these domestic animals composed the vast majority of incidents during the period studied. Almost all of these animals were owned, and females were the majority of complainants. Suspects were almost always young

---

males, and most of the time they allegedly shot, beat, stabbed, or threw their victims. Reportedly, adults were more likely than minors to abuse dogs, shoot them, and do it alone rather than in a group, while minors were more likely to abuse cats, beat them, and do so with peers present. Less than half of the alleged abusers were found guilty in court, one-third were fined, less than one-quarter had to pay restitution, one-fifth were put on probation, one-tenth were sent to jail, and an even smaller percent were required to undergo counseling or perform community service.

Future research on the prevalence of animal cruelty must address and rectify several data collection problems. For example, certain types of cruelty, such as bestiality, may be underrepresented in official reports because the stigmatizing nature of the crime may lead offenders to conceal their cruelty and/or identity from others. Other types of cruelty, such as harm to wildlife, may be underrepresented in official reports because there are rarely witnesses to the crime, given the remoteness of its location. A more general data collection problem stems from the reporting of these crimes. In some cases, individuals who harm animals also commit other crimes that overshadow the cruelty and are managed by local police departments. In such instances, acts of animal cruelty may not be noted in criminal records, and if they are recorded, cruelty incidents are difficult to retrieve because abusers are likely to be identified by other criminal charges, such as assault or public disorder.

Despite these formidable problems, the present research findings make an important contribution to the nascent body of knowledge described by Rowan (1992) as the “dark side” of human-animal relationships. We know much less about the dynamics of human-animal relationships that are destructive and undesirable to humans than those that are positive and beneficial to society. Certainly, knowledge about the former is essential if we hope to develop preventive measures that will reduce the suffering of both humans and animals.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Arnold Arluke, Department of Sociology, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115. This research was supported by the President’s Fund of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and a grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Thanks to Walter Kilroy, Chris Morrissey, Jeb Booth, and Jill Gillingham for their help with data collection and analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Other aspects of prosecuted cruelty cases also were compared between these two time periods. While the percent of abusers being punished remained constant over the entire

twenty years studied, some of the punishments increased in severity.

<sup>3</sup> Many years ago the MSPCA did prosecute cases. They now present cases to the assistant district attorney who is assigned to conduct the prosecution and MSPCA officers testify in court.

<sup>4</sup> Although these cases are thrown out of court, in some instances, judges may lecture defendants or issue informal warnings to them.

<sup>5</sup> In cases where defendants do not appear in court, a bench warrant may be issued for their arrest.

<sup>6</sup> If there is insufficient cause or evidence, a complaint will not be issued.

<sup>7</sup> Complaints may be withdrawn, for example, if suspects agree to pay restitution before or at the start of their hearings. Complaints are then considered resolved and there is no further hearing.

<sup>8</sup> When complaints are continued, the judge does not issue a decision and the case is left open for an extended period of time.

<sup>9</sup> Because suspects in these cases were officially considered to be delinquent, adult complaints were not sought. Often, these offenders were entered into juvenile diversion programs.

<sup>10</sup> Seeing little point in prosecution, the MSPCA did not go through with these complaints because suspects left the country or parents were getting counseling for their children.

<sup>11</sup> In Massachusetts, the maximum penalty for cruelty to animals is a fine of not more than \$1000 and/or imprisonment for not more than one year (Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 272, Section 77).

## References

- Arluke, A. (1996). A comparison of adolescent and adult animal abusers. Unpublished manuscript.
- Ascione, F. (1995). Battered women's reports of their partners' cruelty to animals. Paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Human-animal Interactions, Geneva, Switzerland.
- Beirmes, P. (in press). The causes of animal abuse: A social-psychological analysis. *Theoretical Criminology*.
- Cullen, K. (1992, April 9). Dog's killing stirs outrage. *Boston Globe*, pp. 1, 24.
- Department of Justice (1996). *Crime in America*. Washington, D.C.
- Goetting, A. (1995). *Homicide in families*. New York: Springer.
- Gurr, T. (1989). Historical trends in violent crime: Europe and America. In T. Gurr (Ed.), *Violence in America, 1*, (pp. 21-54). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Hayward, E. (1996, November 29). Man charged with terrorizing girlfriend, setting her on fire. *Boston Herald*, p. 26.
- Hutchinson, B. (1994, June 3). Boy, 13, laughs at law after dog kill. *Boston Herald*, pp. 1, 4.

- 
- Kellert, S. & Felthous, A. (1985). Childhood cruelty toward animals among criminals and noncriminals. *Human Relations*, 18, 1113-1129.
- Levin, J. & McDermitt, J. (1994). *Hate crimes*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Perrin, C. (1988). *Belonging in America*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Rowan, A. (1992). The dark side of the 'Force.' *Anthrozoös*, 5, 4-5.
- Reuters (1996, December 8). "Vampire" cult began with game, youth's mother says. *Boston Globe*, p. A4.
- Rhoades, J. (1981). Attitudes of the public towards dogs and cats as companion animals. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 22, 129-137.
- Vermeulen, H. & Odendaal, J. (1993). Proposed typology of companion animal abuse. *Anthrozoös*, 6, 248-257.
- Wilensky, L. (1995, Summer). Abuse an animal – go to jail! *The Latham Letter*, 15-16.