

Humane Canada- Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women on intimate partner and domestic violence in Canada

Maker of this brief

Humane Canada™, formerly known as the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies, represents more than 50 Humane Societies and SPCAs across Canada, in every province and two territories, with 30% of these organizations responsible for the investigation and enforcement of the animal cruelty sections of the *Criminal Code*. We drive positive, progressive change to end animal cruelty, improve animal protection and promote the humane treatment of all animals.

What is the Violence Link?

Research shows that interpersonal violence and animal abuse are part of a larger pattern of violent crimes that co-exist. Cases of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Domestic Violence (DV), sexual abuse, child abuse (including child sexual abuse) and other crimes such as assault, homicide, and gang violence also commonly involve animal abuse. This phenomenon is known as the Violence Link¹.

Humane Canada's Canadian Violence Link Coalition

Humane Canada™ is the founder of the Canadian Violence Link Coalition (CVLC).

The CVLC bring together stakeholders from both human and animal services who are interested in confronting the human-animal Violence Link as well as the weaknesses of a system that ignores that bond, especially in the IPV and DV context. The CVLC works across sectors to raise awareness of the Violence Link and promote proactive practices that reduce harm in our communities.

The Violence Link in the IPV/DV context

Due to shared experiences of victimization, for women experiencing IPV their companion animals are often a primary source of support. Studies show perpetrators use that strong bond to harm, intimidate and control their partners to be silent about their abuse², prolonging exposure to violence by impacting help-seeking behaviour and subsequent actions of abused women.

A recent Canadian study revealed that animal cruelty is often a precursor to more severe forms of IPV, with an 11% increase in its probability as well as a 16% increase in the possibility of injury and a 25% increase in the likelihood of fearing for one's life³.

The Violence Link creates a barrier for women and girls seeking to leave an unsafe environment

This use of animals to abuse and control women can create a barrier for women seeking to leave an abusive environment. A 2018 Canadian study indicated that 89% of women with companion animals in an IPV relationship reported animal maltreatment by their partner, ranging from emotional abuse and threats of harm to physical abuse or killing⁴. Although 68% of women stated that this animal abuse factored

¹ Humane Canada™, [Review of the Violence Link Literature](#), 2020

² P Arkow, Form of Emotional Blackmail: Animal Abuse as a Risk Factor for DV. *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly*, Summer 2014; 7- 1, pg.7. Civic Research Institute

³ Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A. & Gray, A. (2021). The Co-occurrence of Animal Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence Among a Nationally Representative Sample: Evidence of "The Link" in the General Population. *Violence and Victims*, 36-6, pp. 770-792. Springer Publishing

⁴ Barrett, B. J., Fitzgerald, A., Peirone, A., Stevenson, R., & Chueung, C. H. (2018). Help-seeking among abused women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample. *Violence and Victims*, 33, pp. 604–626. Springer Publishing

heavily into their decision to leave, 56% delayed leaving abusive partners due to concerns for their pets' safety and 1/3 considered returning to their abusive partners because the partners had their pets⁵. Only 1% of Canadian domestic violence shelter in 2018 provided on-site sheltering for companion animals, representing a major barrier to women who must choose between safety and leaving their animal behind with their abuser or giving them up entirely⁶.

Ways to eliminate this barrier

Humane Canada™ is addressing this barrier with the Awareness, Collaboration, Tools (ACT) for Women with Animals Experiencing Gender-Based Violence Project, a 33-month project funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada. Through this project we will provide policies and tools for communities to address this barrier,⁷ for example through the provision of off-site pet fostering programs, or on-site co-sheltering facilities. It is imperative that **government provides sustainable and consistent funding for DV shelters and animal rescue organisations to build the support networks and facilities needed to assist women with animals facing IPV.**

All **stakeholders who intersect with a woman facing these barriers also need to be trained on the Violence Link** so that they understand what signs to look for and can act proactively and holistically. For example, a police officer called to an animal abuse case should be looking for signs of DV and should have at their fingertips the details of the local women's shelters and pet fostering organisations.

Coercive Control

The Violence Link is recognised in federal legislation, for example threats of or actual harm or killing of an animal are included within the definition of family violence in the March 2021 changes to the federal *Divorce Act*⁸.

The Violence Link in the coercive control context is also already recognised in other jurisdictions. For example, in the UK, a national prosecution strategy that addresses coercive behaviours and recognises the Violence Link, *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship*⁹, supports national coercive control legislation.

At the provincial level, in the amendment made to the *Children's Law Reform Act* as part of the *Moving Ontario Family Law Forward Act, 2020*, within the definition of family violence is "(h) threats to kill or harm an animal or damage property; and (i) the killing or harming of an animal or the damaging of property."¹⁰

A coercive control bill at the federal level which recognises the Violence Link is needed in order to provide a basis for stakeholder training and the opportunity to prosecute and impose appropriate orders (to prevent further victimization and harm) when this special human-animal bond is exploited in the IPV context.

⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A. & Gray, A. (2021). The Co-occurrence of Animal Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence Among a Nationally Representative Sample: Evidence of "The Link" in the General Population. *Violence and Victims*, 36-6, pp. 770-792. Springer Publishing
⁷ [ACT \(Awareness, Collaboration, Tools\) Project for Women with Animals Experiencing Gender-Based Violence](#)
⁸ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/d-3.4/>
⁹ [Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship | The Crown Prosecution Service UK](#)
¹⁰ *Children's Law Reform Act*, RSO 1990, c C.12, s 18, <https://canlii.ca/t/8k#sec18>