

Animal and Interpersonal Abuse Research Group Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women for its Study on Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Canada

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What we know about “the link”

A significant body of research has established “the link” between violence against humans and non-human animals in abusive households^{vi}. AIPARG has been collecting and analyzing Canadian data on this link for over ten years. Our analysis of nationally representative data through the General Social Survey (GSS) found that 1 in 8 survivors of physical intimate partner violence (IPV) in Canada had experienced threatened or enacted violence against their pets.^{vii} In a follow-up investigation of the relation between animal maltreatment and help seeking using this data, we found that survivors of IPV whose pets had been threatened or harmed were 6.8 times more likely to report that they feared for their lives than survivors of domestic violence whose perpetrators did not threaten or enact harm against their pets.^{viii} In our research with survivors in 16 battered women’s shelters in Canada, 89% of those with pets stated that their perpetrators had threatened, neglected, or perpetrated emotional or physical harm against their pets.^{ix} One in four survivors (25%) with pets reported at least one severe form of physical abuse against their pets; roughly one in seven (14.8%) conveyed that their perpetrator had killed their pet. For example, one participant in our research wrote *“I bought a Persian cat. He beat it and choked it to death the day I brought it home.”* Survivors who indicated more frequent and severe violence against their pets were also found to be at higher risk of elevated violence (minor and severe physical abuse, severe psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and economic abuse) than survivors without pets or those whose pets experienced no or minimal harm.^x

“The link” as a barrier to help seeking

Research has consistently shown that some of the strongest predictors of help seeking for survivors of IPV are severity of abuse, fearing for one’s life, and/or experiencing injuries. For survivors seeking to escape violence who perceive that their lives are in danger if they stay, shelters provide a vital lifeline. For example, in our analysis of GSS data, IPV survivors who feared for their lives were 5.5 times more likely to state that they had attempted to seek help from shelters or transition houses than survivors who did not report fearing for their lives.^{xi} In addition to the connection between fearing for one’s safety and animal abuse found in our analysis of GSS data, 56% of the survivors in domestic violence shelters we surveyed reported they delayed leaving their abuser due to concern for the well-being of their pets, and those who reported delaying leaving were more likely to report they had been subjected to severe physical IPV.^{xii}

Despite the vital role that access to safe shelter may play in facilitating a survivor’s ability to extract themselves from dangerous situations, survivors with pets face barriers in identifying and accessing emergency housing that can accommodate them with their pets. In AIPARG’s analysis of the public websites of 337 first stage domestic violence shelters in Canada, we found that only 1% of shelters

explicitly state on their websites that they can accommodate pets on-site.^{xiii} Over 70% provided no direct information regarding the potential of assisting survivors with their pets. The paucity of available emergency shelter supports that can accommodate pets on or off-site is particularly concerning given that almost half (47%) of participants in our study of survivors in domestic violence shelters indicated that it was likely or extremely likely that they would have left their relationship earlier if they could have taken their pets to shelter with them.^{xiv} These findings resonate with the perceptions of staff at domestic violence shelters assessed in our research, 75% of whom indicated that they were aware of survivors in the community who had not come to shelter because they could not bring their pets with them.^{xv}

Recommended public policy

Promoting the inter-related well-being of humans and non-human animals through public policy to mitigate shared threats is endorsed by the World Health Organization's One Health approach^{xvi}. The One Health approach "recognizes that the health of people is closely connected to the health of animals and our shared environment"^{xvii} and affirms the salience of the human-animal bond in promoting positive bio-psycho-social outcomes for humans. **In accordance with this model, we advocate for the implementation of federal policy to increase the availability of safe emergency and transition housing for survivors and their pets as a pressing national policy need.** Increased availability of pet friendly emergency and transition housing is only the first step. Access to safe, affordable, and secure pet-friendly housing is a need after survivors leave shelter. Expanded access to such housing is not only necessary for the promotion of health and safety for human and non-human survivors of violence but is also consistent with Canada's construction of access to housing as a human right. As stated in the National Housing Strategy Act of 2019, the Government of Canada recognizes "that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law" and that "housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person."^{xviii}

In the United States, the Pet and Women Safety (PAWS) Act^{xix} was signed into law in 2018^{xx}. This bill extended protections to survivors of IPV by including pets in federal laws governing protection order violations and interstate stalking. The act also increased the capacity of domestic violence shelters to serve survivors fleeing violence with their pets through establishing grant funding (\$3M USD to start) to support the development of pet safekeeping programs by domestic violence shelters. **We recommend adopting a similar model of an established grant fund, either federally or provincially administered, to which domestic violence shelters can apply to implement and support needed pet programs.** We are currently examining the advantages and drawbacks of different pet sheltering programs in Canada (i.e., in shelter, on-site but in a separate building, off-site foster program, off-site kenneling) vis-à-vis impacts on IPV survivors, their children, their pets, and shelter staff. Domestic violence shelters can use this information in their decisions about the type of pet program to implement, but this knowledge will only take us so far. Demands on shelters are high and their resources limited: additional funding for program implementation is urgently needed. While pet programs may have previously been perceived by some as trivial, research and lived experience have shown these are essential resources for survivor safety. Adequate funding is critical to ensure such programs are available to every survivor regardless of where they live in Canada. In a time of increasing pet ownership, (social) media exposure of people trying to flee dangerous situations with their pets (e.g., floods in BC, war in Ukraine), and research explaining how pets can be a barrier to escaping a violent relationship, pet programs can now be viewed for what they are: tools for reducing a significant barrier to help-seeking, and by extension, a way to save lives.

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^v (a) 2019, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Insight Grant Program. *Where Vulnerability and Victimization Intersect but Escape Routes Do Not: The Co-Occurrence of Animal Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence in Canada*; (b) 2019, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Partnership Engage Program. *Facilitating Safe Housing for Women and Pets Fleeing Abusive Relationships*; (c) 2018, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Connection Grant Program. *Animals and Us: Research, Policy, and Practice*; (d) 2012-2013, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Insight Development Grant Program. *An Exploration of the Relationship between Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse in Canada and Its Impact on Help Seeking Behavior among Abused Women*.

^{vi} For a review of this literature, please see (a) Fitzgerald, A., Barrett, B.J., Stevenson, R., & Fritz, P. (2021). Domestic violence and animal abuse. In J. Devaney, C. Bradbury-Jones, R. Macy, C. Øverlien & S. Holt (Eds). *The Routledge handbook of domestic violence and abuse* (pp. 325-339). Routledge; (b) Cleary, M., Thapa, D.K., West, S., Westman, M., & Kornhaber, R. (2021). Animal abuse in the context of adult intimate partner violence: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 61*, Article 101676. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101676>

^{vii} Fitzgerald, A., Barrett, B.J., & 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), 770-792.

^{viii} Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A., & Cheung, C. (2021). Domestic violence, companion animal abuse, and help seeking: The mediating role of fear of lethal violence. *Women & Criminal Justice*. Advance online publication. DOI: [10.1080/08974454.2021.2004970](https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2021.2004970)

^{ix} Fitzgerald, A., Barrett, B.J., Shwom, R., Stevenson, R., & Chernyak, E. (2016). Development of the Partner's Treatment of Animals Scale (PTAS). *Anthrozoos, 29*(4), 611-625.

^x Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A., Stevenson, R., & Cheung, C. (2020). Animal abuse as a risk marker of more frequent and severe forms of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 35*(23-34), 5131-5156.

^{xi} Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A., & Cheung, C. (2021). Domestic violence, companion animal abuse, and help seeking: The mediating role of fear of lethal violence. *Women & Criminal Justice*. Advance online publication. DOI: [10.1080/08974454.2021.2004970](https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2021.2004970)

^{xii} Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A., Stevenson, R., Cheung, C., & Peirone, A. (2018). Help-seeking among abuse women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample. *Violence & Victims, 33*(4), 604-626.

^{xiii} Gray, A., Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A., & Peirone, A. (2019). Fleeing with Fido: An analysis of what Canadian domestic violence shelters are communicating via their websites about leaving an abusive relationship when pets are involved. *Journal of Family Violence, 34*(4), 287-298.

^{xiv} Barrett, B.J., Fitzgerald, A., Stevenson, R., Cheung, C., & Peirone, A. (2018). Help-seeking among abuse women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample. *Violence & Victims, 33*(4), 604-626.

^{xv} Stevenson, R., Fitzgerald, A., & Barrett, B.J. (2018). Keeping pets safe in the context of intimate partner violence: Insights from domestic violence shelter staff in Canada. *Affilia: The Journal of Women and Social Work, 33*(2), 236-252.

^{xvi} World Health Organization (2017, September 21). *One Health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/one-health>

^{xvii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, February 7). *One Health Basics*. <https://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/basics/index.html>

^{xviii} Government of Canada. (2019). National Housing Strategy Act. S.C. 2019, c29, s 313. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/n-11.2/FullText.html>

^{xix} Grinberg, E. (2018, December 21). A new law aims to help the pets of victims of domestic violence. *CNN Politics*. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/20/politics/paws-act-farm-bill/index.html>

^{xx} U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2019, October 1). *Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018: Highlights and Implications*. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/agriculture-improvement-act-of-2018-highlights-and-implications/>