

USF study finds childhood animal cruelty is indicator for violent offenders

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TAMPA, Fla. (March 1, 2003) - Offenders of violent crimes are significantly more likely to have abused pets and stray animals in their childhood, according to a study by University of South Florida professor Kathleen Heide and animal welfare expert Linda Merz-Perez. Indicating that animal abuse during childhood serves as a "red flag" early on, the study is the first to provide both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the correlation between childhood animal cruelty and adult violent behavior. The results are published in Heide's recently released third book, *Animal Cruelty: Pathway to Violence Against People*, co-authored by Merz-Perez.

The findings from the study have far-reaching implications for the fields of juvenile justice, domestic abuse, animal welfare and rights, developmental psychology and law enforcement. Results bring to the fore important issues for parents and guardians, such as taking the first signs of cruelty toward animals seriously and immediately intervening in instances of abuse.

"We're not just talking about kicking a dog here," Heide said. "The violent offenders, in sharp contrast to the non-violent offenders, were far more likely as children to have committed extreme acts of abuse against a family pet or neighborhood animals-acts that the average person would find abhorrent and somewhat gruesome." Acts of animal cruelty reported by violent offenders included stomping a kitten to death, setting a dog on fire and having sex with an animal.

Participants for the scientific study were selected from a random sample of approximately 100 male violent and non-violent inmates at a maximum-security facility. Among the violent offenders, 33 percent were convicted of murder, manslaughter or attempted murder; 31 percent were convicted of sexual battery; and the rest were convicted of other violent offenses. The researchers interviewed the participants and then coded the data using two data collection instruments: The first identified the type of cruelty according to pet, stray, wild and farm animal categories, and the second measured levels of abuse and neglect that inmates reported experiencing in their families.

Heide and Merz-Perez found that the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the two samples was high. What set the violent offenders apart from the non-violent offenders was not their histories of child abuse. Rather, it was their experiences mistreating animals as children. In addition to being significantly more likely than non-violent offenders to have abused pet and stray animals, violent offenders also showed a tendency toward abuse of wild and farm animals.

"We noticed in some cases that the type of abuse violent offenders inflicted on an animal was similar to the type of act they later committed on people," Heide said. "Also, violent offenders rarely expressed any remorse for their actions or empathy for the animals."

The study points out that early intervention following an act of animal cruelty is imperative to helping ensure that adolescents do not follow a path of violent behavior. Specifically, the study

suggests that corrective intervention that helps the child develop empathy for the animal as a living, breathing being is an effective preventative strategy.

"In one instance, a non-violent offender related that he had received a rifle as a birthday gift from his grandfather when he was a boy. He wanted to see what the gun would do so he went outside and impulsively shot and killed a neighbor's pig. His grandfather, after learning what the boy did, broke the gun and made the boy work for a year on his neighbor's farm, feeding and caring for the pigs as punishment," Heide said. "As a result, the participant developed tender feelings and sincere remorse for these animals, and never did anything like this again."

The only instances in which non-violent offenders had a record of abusing domestic animals were in three cases where participants used their animals in competitive dog fighting. These individuals did not view the dogs as victims. Rather they saw their dogs as warriors, according to Merz-Perez.

"These men exhibited great pride in their animals, providing them with food, shelter and medical care when necessary," Merz-Perez said. "Given their cultural background and experiences, they thought it would have been cruel not to let their dogs fight."

Heide is professor of criminology, a licensed mental health counselor, and interim dean of arts and sciences at USF. She is an internationally recognized expert on adolescent homicide, family violence, personality assessment and juvenile justice, and is the author of two other books, *Why Kids Kill Parents: Child Abuse and Adolescent Homicide* and *Young Killers: The Challenge of Juvenile Homicide*. Merz-Perez, a USF alumna, is a certified animal control officer and former executive director of the Humane Society of Shelby County, Alabama. She serves on the boards of Hand-in-Paw of Birmingham, Ala., and the SPCA of West Pasco, Fla., and is a national consultant on matters relating to animal cruelty and welfare.