

## Animal Abuse as a Sentinel for Human Violence: A Critique

Emily G. Patterson-Kane<sup>1</sup>\*Heather Piper<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> American Veterinary Medical Association

<sup>2</sup> Manchester Metropolitan University

\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily G. Patterson-Kane, American Veterinary Medical Association, 1931 N. Meacham Rd., Ste. 100, Schaumburg, IL 60173 [e-mail: [EKane@avma.org](mailto:EKane@avma.org)].

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# ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that acts of violence against human and nonhuman animals share commonalities, and that animal abuse is a sentinel for current or future violence toward people. The popular and professional acceptance of strong connections between types of violence is beginning to be used to justify social work interventions and to influence legal decision making, and so requires greater scrutiny. Examination of the limited pool of empirical data suggests that animal abuse is relatively common among men, with violent offenders having an increased probability of reporting prior animal abuse—with the majority of violent offenders not reporting any animal abuse. Causal explanations for "the link," such as empathy impairment or conduct disorder, suffer from a lack of validating research and, based on research into interhuman violence, the assumption that violence has a predominant, single underlying cause must be questioned. An (over)emphasis on the danger that animal abusers pose to humans serves to assist in achieving a consensus that animal abuse is a serious issue, but potentially at the cost of failing to focus on the most common types of abuse, and the most effective strategies for reducing its occurrence. Nothing in this review and discussion should be taken as minimizing the importance of animals as frequent victims of violence, or the co-occurrence of abuse types in "at-risk" households. However, given the weakness of the underlying data, emphasizing the indiscriminate dangerousness of all animal abusers may have unforeseen and unwanted consequences.