

Pets & Domestic Violence

“He is very controlling over me. So if he even suspects of me leaving or staying somewhere else he will start to torture the cat and dog until he is convinced that I am not leaving him. I can’t leave or he will kill them.”¹

HOW ARE PET ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RELATED?

Pets are often targets of domestic violence. Abusers frequently threaten, injure or kill their intimate partner’s or children’s pets to exert power and coercive control over their victim. Because victims understand the extent of the harm their abusers are likely to inflict upon their pets, many hesitate to leave violent relationships out of concern for their pets’ safety.² Recognizing this, an increasing number of shelters have added on-site animal housing or instituted ‘safe haven’ animal foster care programs to protect victims, their children and their pets.

WHY IT MATTERS

- Pets are an important source of emotional support for victims of intimate partner violence and their children.³
- Studies have shown that domestic abusers threaten or harm pets:
 - To exert power and coercive control
 - As part of a pattern of emotional and psychological abuse
 - To punish victims/survivors for acting against the abusers’ wishes
 - Because they were jealous of the victim/survivor’s relationship with the pet
 - To force victims/survivors to ‘follow the rules’
 - To prevent victims/survivors from leaving or to punish them for doing so
 - To display to victims/survivors what would happen to them if they left or disobeyed
 - To exert financial control
 - To isolate victims
 - To abuse victims/survivors without risking a domestic violence conviction⁴
- Survivors who experience co-occurring animal abuse often experience more severe and frequent intimate partner violence than those experiencing intimate partner violence without animal abuse.⁵
- Animal abuse is one of the primary predictors of domestic violence by men against women.⁶
- Witnessing animal abuse compounds victims’ trauma and often causes guilt, stress, anxiety, and anger.⁷
- Children who witness co-occurring domestic violence and animal abuse exhibit more emotional and behavior problems than children who witness domestic violence without animal abuse.⁸

DID YOU KNOW?

- Women in domestic violence shelters are 11 times more likely to report their partner has hurt or killed a pet than women who have not experienced intimate partner violence.⁹
- One study found that nearly a quarter of children who witnessed a domestic abuser committing animal abuse also engaged in animal abuse.¹⁰
- People who abuse animals are more likely than non-animal abusers to perpetrate domestic violence, to have been arrested for violent crimes and drug-related offenses and to engage in other delinquent behavior.¹¹
- In one study, 85% of survivors who experienced co-occurring animal abuse reported that the behavior of their pets had changed.¹²

If you are in crisis, contact The National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or www.TheHotline.org.

Please visit the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence’s](http://www.ncadv.org) website at www.ncadv.org for more fact sheets, membership information, and valuable resources.

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- A study of pet-owning adult women experiencing intimate partner violence drawn from the general population (not shelter) found that 57.5% experienced verbal threats by the abuser against their pets and 77% witnessed physical abuse of their pets.¹³
- Approximately half of men arrested for domestic violence report committing animal abuse, compared to 17% of women arrested for domestic violence.¹⁴
- 85% of domestic violence shelters report they commonly encounter women who speak about pet abuse incidents.¹⁵
- Domestic abusers often use firearms and other weapons to threaten and harm pets.¹⁶
- Like intimate partner violence, animal abuse often escalates over time.¹⁷

BARRIERS TO SEEKING SERVICES

- Although this is changing, many domestic violence shelters cannot accommodate pets, so survivors may be forced to choose between their safety and that of their beloved companion animals.
- A survey of survivors found that 65% of respondents reported that concerns about their pets' safety impacted their decision to enter a shelter, with 88% of these reporting they delayed seeking shelter as a result.¹⁸
- Up to 40% of domestic violence victims remain in abusive relationships, because they cannot find alternative living situations for their pets.¹⁹
- 52% of pet owners in shelters are forced to leave their pets with their batterers.²⁰
- 65% of women who report prior pet abuse continue to worry for their pets' welfare after entering a shelter.²¹

TIPS FOR VICTIMS WITH PETS

- Some shelters allow pets, and others have established 'safe haven' foster care programs for animal victims of domestic violence.
- Prepare the pets for a quick departure: collect vaccination records, medical records, pet licenses, and other important documents.
- If a victim/survivor cannot take pets with them when leaving, try to arrange temporary shelter for the pets with a veterinarian, family member, trusted friend or local animal shelter.
- When vaccinating pets against rabies and licensing them with the town or county, register them in the victim/survivor's name. This will serve as proof that the victim/survivor owns the pets.
- Ask for help from law enforcement or animal care and control officers if pets need to be retrieved from the abuser. Never reclaim animals alone.

A database of pet-friendly shelters and other resources for survivors with pets can be found at <https://safehavensforpets.org/> or <https://safeplaceforpets.org/>.

RedRover provides Safe Housing grants to shelters to help offset the costs of becoming pet-friendly. Learn more at <https://redrover.org/relief-dv/dv-safe-housing-grants/>.

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More information about addressing the needs of survivors with pets, including free consultation opportunities, can be found at <https://dontforgetthepets.org/>. Also, visit http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/SAF-TWebinar-PAWSStartupGuide.pdf for a start-up guide.

- ¹ Collins, E. A., Cody, A. M., McDonald, S. E., Nicotera, N., Ascione, F. R., & Williams, J. H. (2018). A template analysis of intimate partner violence survivors' experiences of animal maltreatment: Implications for safety planning and intervention. *Violence Against Women, 24*(4), 452-476. doi: 10.1177/1077801217697266.
- ² 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*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101676>
- ³ Ibid
- ⁴ Roguski, M. (2012). *Pets as pawns: The co-existence of animal cruelty and family violence*. Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and The National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges. <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/DV-PetsAsPawnsNZ.pdf>; 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*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101676>; Newbery, M. (2017). Pets in danger: Exploring the link between domestic violence and animal abuse. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 34*, 273-281.
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- ⁷ 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*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101676>
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- ⁹ Ascione, F. R., Weber, C. V., Thompson, T. M., Heath, J., Maruyama, M., & Hayashi, K. (2007). Battered pets and domestic violence: Animal abuse reported by women experiencing intimate violence and by non-abused women. *Violence Against Women, 13*(4), 354-373.
- ¹⁰ Collins, E. A., Cody, A. M., McDonald, S. E., Nicotera, N., Ascione, F. R., & Williams, J. H. (2018). A template analysis of intimate partner violence survivors' experiences of animal maltreatment: Implications for safety planning and intervention. *Violence Against Women, 24*(4), 452-476. doi: 10.1177/1077801217697266.
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- ¹² 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*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101676>
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²⁰ Ibid.

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