

Fears for pets can put abused women at further risk, according to research

June 27 2017, by Allison Gray, Amy Fitzgerald And Betty Jo Barrett



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As researchers looking into the [intersection of abuse against people and](#)

[animals](#), we asked survivors of intimate partner violence in shelters across Canada about a normally pleasant topic: their pets.

Not surprisingly, many said they had strong bonds with their pets. However, many [women](#) also said their pets had been mistreated by their abusive partners. This made many of the women want to leave their abusers, but they were also worried that if they left, their pets would be harmed in their absence.

Not being able to take their pets with them to shelters meant the majority of women delayed leaving their abusive partners.

This is the intersection of animal abuse and [intimate partner violence](#).

Dangers for pets *and* women

When we asked these women about how their pets were treated by their abuser, we found the [animals](#) were harmed and abused in many ways. Most research usually focuses on physical animal abuse, but we found that threats, emotional animal abuse and neglect were also common. In order to better measure this issue, we created the [Partners' Treatment of Animals Scale](#) to bring all these types of abuse and harm together.

We also looked at the [relationship between pet abuse and the amount and extent of abuse experienced by women](#). In our sample, more frequent and severe animal abuse was linked to women being at higher risk of severe psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

Not only is the security and well-being of pets at risk, but so is the health and safety of women and children.

Shelter limitations

Many shelters across the country have off-site programs to care for the pets of abused women. These are most commonly through partnerships with humane societies, other charitable organizations and veterinary clinics.

However, these programs have two main limitations.

First, often they can only care for the women's pets for a short period of time. Second, they [require women – and their children – to be separated from their pets](#), which is something most do not want to do.

We also found many women in our sample (48 per cent) were not told by staff about the off-site services available for their pets. And many of the women who were told about the services were only told after they were already at the shelter and had left their pets behind.

There are a few shelters in the country that allow women's pets to come with them. These programs are not subject to the limitations discussed above. However, most shelters in the country do not currently have the resources and logistical information necessary to develop on-site pet programs. This means [many women do not come to shelters because they cannot bring their pets](#) with them.

These limitations, combined with the high rate of co-occurrence between animal maltreatment and intimate partner violence (89 per cent in our sample), increase the risk of harm to both people and pets. Fifty-six per cent of our sample of [abused women](#) said they delayed leaving their abusive partners because they were worried about their pets' well-being. Sixty per cent eventually did leave their pets with their abusive partners once they fled to a shelter. Further, about one-third of these women left shelters to return home to check on their pets, and were also thinking about reuniting with their abuser because he had their pets.

Powerful bond

We are currently finalizing our research with a national sample of [shelter](#) staff, as well as a sample representing the general public. This information will give us critical feedback about the unique needs that women with pets have and how to best help women and their pets escape abusive partners. It will also tell us about the prevalence of this problem among the general population, not just among women who have accessed shelters.

Our [goal](#) is to provide individuals and organizations working with survivors of intimate [partner](#) violence with data and support to establish on-site pet services at shelters across Canada. This will allow victims of [abuse](#) to seek help without concern for their pets' safety, and without having to be separated from their pets during such a difficult time.

Not only might this save the lives of women who will not have to choose between the safety of their pets and themselves, but it can [protect the powerful bond between women and pets](#) – a bond that can help women survive violence and be resilient in the face of it.

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