

# Animal abuse as a pretext for interpersonal violence

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The federal government recently passed a bill making it a felony to torture, abuse and/or neglect animals. Violating the law carries up to a seven-year prison sentence.

But what defines "abuse and neglect" is now up for debate.

A new study by researchers at Case Western Reserve University examines how lawmakers could improve guidelines and policies to keep animal abusers from slipping through the cracks. Researchers also zeroed in on the well-established link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence.

"Those who torture and abuse animals are much more likely to have other violent tendencies, ranging from domestic violence to elder abuse," said Aviva Vincent, the lead researcher and associate professor at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences. The findings were [published in the journal Society Register](#).

However, there's a disconnect between the bill and practice: animal cruelty has a different meaning in a social context than in the legal framework. "There's a social hierarchy to animal abuse," Vincent said. "Do you call a social worker or the police?"

The bill—which doesn't apply to those who hunt, trap or fish—leaves open to interpretation some essential details for law enforcement, veterinarians and social workers to sort out.

"If I deliberately step on an ant, is it animal abuse? Would you call the police or a social worker?" Vincent posited. But she also believes most people would agree that violence to a household pet, for example, would warrant calls to both social services and law enforcement.

"The ambiguity in the law makes it difficult to prosecute," Vincent said. "Documenting cases, bringing charges and achieving a conviction is difficult."

For the study, researchers culled data from a national criminal database, studying hundreds of animal-abuse cases since the 1980s.

"We've taken all this information, all the existing research," Vincent said, "and highlighted that acts of cruelty to animals are not mere indications of a minor personality flaw in the abuser—they're more a symptom of a deeper mental disturbance."

## **State of legislation**

Laws for reporting animal abuse vary by state, according to the research. For example, some state laws require a different set of professionals—such as law enforcement or social workers—to report abuse.

"Additionally, while some level of mandated reporting of child and elder abuse is present in every state, laws requiring the reporting of animal abuse are nowhere near so prevalent," Vincent said.

In Ohio, House Bill 33 is working its way through the legislative process. If passed, it would require professionals who encounter abused animals to report those suspected cases.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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