Introduction

Despite efforts to reduce domestic violence (DV), victimization rates have remained stubbornly stable, prompting Caman and colleagues to remark, “these tendencies putatively highlight the need for novel approaches in combating gender-based violence” (2017, p. 19). Reducing barriers to formal help-seeking has been a key target for intervention (see Barnett, 2000, 2001; Sauvé & Burns, 2009), and valuable work has been undertaken to minimize barriers encountered by transgender individuals, racialized women, and undocumented women, among others.

Another sizeable population group that warrants focused attention is victims/survivors with pets. For instance, over half of Canadian (57%) and US (65%) homes contain pets (American Pet Products Association, 2017; Canadian Pet Market Outlook, 2014). Moreover, the vast majority consider their animal companions family: in the 2018 US General Social Survey, 93% of respondents reported they consider their dogs members of the family, as did 83% of those with cats (Ingraham, 2019).

As such, companion animals are vulnerable to violence perpetrated within the family, and this vulnerability is increasingly being acknowledged by scholars, practitioners, policy makers and the general public (evidenced by an article in People Magazine [2019]). Research on the subject is relatively new (originating approximately 25 years ago) and has focused on documenting rates of animal maltreatment within DV, the predictive power of animal maltreatment perpetration vis-à-vis the use of controlling behaviours, traits of perpetrators and the consequences of these co-occurring forms of victimization for adult and child victims/survivors of DV. New policies and legislation continue to be introduced with the goal of mitigating these consequences. Research contributions in relation to these themes are explored in this chapter, and discussion of the limitations of this relatively new body of literature weaved throughout. This scholarship constitutes a novel approach of the type called for by Caman and colleagues (2017) and is beginning to have promising impacts on policy and law.

Discussion and analysis

Although research on the subject is relatively new, acknowledging pets in discussions of DV is not. The victimization of animals within DV was mentioned in the academic literature...
beginning in the 1970s (e.g., Walker, 1979). The abuse of pets was also included in interventions, notably in the well-known Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), wherein “abusing pets” is included in the Using Intimidation category, right after “smashing things; destroying her property”. It was not until the late 1990s that research attention became concentrated on the prevalence, aetiology and implications of the co-occurrence of animal abuse and DV.²

Documenting the co-occurrence of animal maltreatment and domestic violence

The earliest research examining animal abuse within DV utilized samples of women in DV shelters in the US. The documented proportions of women reporting that their partner also mistreated their pet have ranged from 25%–86% (Ascione, 1998; Carlisle-Frank, Frank, & Nielsen, 2004; Collins et al., 2018; Faver & Cavazos Jr, 2007; Faver & Strand, 2003; Flynn, 2000a, 2000b; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Strand & Faver, 2005). Studies in other countries, including Australia (Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008), Ireland (Allen, Gallagher, & Jones, 2006) and New Zealand (Roguski, 2012) have also documented similar ranges. Recent research with 16 shelters in Canada documented a slightly higher proportion (89%) of women reporting their partner also mistreated their pet (Barrett, Fitzgerald, Stevenson, & Cheung, 2017; Fitzgerald, Barrett, Stevenson, & Cheung, 2019).

This wide range of reported co-occurrence of animal abuse and DV in shelters is likely due to several factors. Some samples have been relatively small and, as such, might be influenced more by outlying values; many of the samples are drawn from one community, and a variety of community-specific factors could impact the relationship observed; and the way that animal maltreatment is measured has varied, with some researchers operationalizing it strictly as physical abuse and others including threats and non-physical abuse. The Partners’ Treatment of Animals Scale (PTAS; Fitzgerald, Barrett, Shwom, Stevenson, & Chernyak, 2016) was developed to mitigate this latter issue. The instrument is a 21-item scale, with five sub-scales, that measures reports of physical and emotional animal abuse, threats and neglect by intimate partners.

Another limitation of the early work was uncertainty that the amount of animal abuse documented among shelter samples was different from the proportion in the general population. Two key studies demonstrated that animal mistreatment reported by shelter samples is dramatically higher than that reported by women in the community not exposed to DV. In Ascione and colleagues’ (2007) study, women in shelter were 11 times more likely to report their partner had mistreated their pets compared to their community sample of women. Of Volant and colleagues’ (2008) shelter sample, 46% reported their partner made threats regarding the pets and 53% reported pet abuse. This was significantly higher than what they found among their community sample: no one reported animal abuse and only 6% reported threats against their pets.

Collectively, these studies provided evidence that reports of partner-perpetrated animal abuse are common among shelter samples – significantly more so than among the general population. However, it was unclear if the relationship between animal abuse and DV could be generalized from women in shelters to abuse victims/survivors in the community not accessing shelter services. DV research indicates that a small fraction of those abused by a partner seek out shelter services (see Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). In order to assess the degree of generalizability to victims/survivors in the community, Fitzgerald, Barrett, Gray, and Cheung (2020) analyzed the Canadian General Social Survey, which included a question about animal maltreatment for the first time in 2014. Threatening and abusive behaviour towards pets was significantly more common among those who report DV perpetration by their partner (13%) than among respondents
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who were not abused (0.84%). After controlling for socio-demographic correlates of DV, those who report animal maltreatment by their partner have an 11% increased probability of also experiencing physical and/or sexual DV and 39% increased probability of experiencing emotional abuse. Moreover, animal maltreatment was a much stronger predictor of intimate partner violence (IPV) than the socio-demographic variables included in the models.

What animal abuse can tell us about domestic violence

Animal maltreatment has commonly been perceived to be a form of coercive control and/or psychological abuse, which are broad patterns of behaviours aimed at displaying and exerting power over a partner (see Stark, 2007; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Carol Adams (1995) was among the first to suggest that there are numerous ways in which animal maltreatment contributes to coercive control: by harming animals the perpetrator demonstrates and confirms his/her power, teaches submission (further) isolates the victim and perpetuates an environment of terror and fear. Animal maltreatment may also be used to show victims what might happen to them if they attempt to act independently and to cause victims to experience guilt, fear and grief (Adams, 1995; Faver & Strand, 2007). Consistent with these claims, researchers have shown that animal maltreatment perpetration is related to greater use of controlling behaviours (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007) and psychological aggression (Ascione et al., 2007; Febres et al., 2014; Haden, McDonald, Booth, Ascione, & Blakelock, 2018). In qualitative research victims/survivors have similarly described control as motivation for animal maltreatment by their abuser (Allen et al., 2006; Flynn, 2000a, 2000b; Newberry, 2017).

Researchers have found that the stronger the victim-pet bond, the greater the use of animal maltreatment by perpetrators (Faver & Strand, 2007; Strand & Faver, 2005). This is consistent with feminist DV theories and theories of coercive control in that perpetrators are known to create and exploit victims’ vulnerabilities (Adams, 1995; Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Pence & Paymar, 1993). It is as if the animals become extensions of the victims such that harming the animals also brings harm to the (human) victims (Adams, 1994; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Flynn, 2000a); this might be even more likely in cases where the animals are emotional support or service animals, although targeted research is needed.

Recent research disaggregating forms of animal maltreatment into several types (i.e., physical, emotional, threats and neglect) found that while participants perceived their abuser’s neglect of their pets and emotional and threatening behaviour directed towards them as motivated by a desire to secure and maintain power and control, they did not perceive physical animal abuse perpetration as having the same motivations (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). While further research is needed, possible explanations for this finding include victims/survivors may more easily interpret neglect/emotional abuse/threats as motivated by power and control compared to physical abuse; (severe) physical abuse may not be used as a tool of power and control because it risks irrevocably harming the animal and making him/her no longer useful instrumentally; as abuse escalates, coercive control and physical abuse may become focused on the woman herself instead of the pets; and different types of abusers might harm animals for different reasons (see Fitzgerald et al., 2019).

These and other studies are increasingly demonstrating that those who report animal abuse by a partner are more likely to also be subjected to varied, frequent and severe DV (Ascione et al., 2007; DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005). Simmons and Lehmann (2007) found in their Texas shelter sample that those who reported their abuser mistreated their pets were more likely to also report multiple forms of DV perpetration. Ascione and colleagues (2007) documented a significant relationship
between severe physical DV and animal maltreatment among their Utah shelter sample. Among their Canadian shelter sample, Barrett and colleagues (2017) found women who reported animal maltreatment by their partner were significantly more likely to report more chronic and severe psychological, physical and sexual victimization than those who reported minimal or no animal maltreatment, even compared to those who did not have companion animals. Finally, in a study of risk factors for severe DV and intimate homicide, animal maltreatment was one of the most significant risk factors identified (Walton-Moss et al., 2005).

One study using a shelter sample of primarily Hispanic American women found a negative relationship between DV severity and animal maltreatment. Hartman and colleagues (2015) found that although respondents who reported animal maltreatment by their partner were significantly more likely to report severe psychological abuse, they were less likely to report severe physical DV. To explain the finding, they raise the possibility that cultural differences in affective relationships may make instrumentalizing the abuse of animals to harm human victims less effective in some cultures, and therefore less likely to be employed. Other studies have documented racial/ethnic differences in pet ownership and affective relations with animals (e.g., Brown, 2002; Siegel, 1995); however, small and homogeneous samples have precluded drawing conclusions about the possibility that culture can influence the relationship between animal maltreatment and DV.

Analysis of the Canadian GSS data described earlier (Fitzgerald et al., 2020) also found that animal maltreatment is a significant predictor of DV severity, net of several socio-demographic control variables. Specifically, animal maltreatment is associated with increases in the probability of reporting physical abuse (by 5.2%), injuries (by 16.1%) and fear for one’s life (by 24.7%). The proportion of those who identified as white and reported animal maltreatment was higher than those who were non-white; however, statistical significance was not quite reached. Further investigation into potential differences across racial/ethnic groups is needed. Significant differences were found for other socio-demographic groups: animal maltreatment by a partner was more likely to be reported by those who were younger, had a lower income and reported a disability or daily limitation.

**Impact of animal maltreatment on victims/survivors and their children**

Extensive research has documented the often long-lasting deleterious effects of DV (Bacchus, Ranganathan, Watts, & Devries, 2018; Simmons, Knight, & Menard, 2018) and children’s experiences of DV (Howell, Barnes, Miller, & Graham-Bermann, 2016; Vu, Jouriles, McDon-ald, & Rosenfield, 2016). Much less research has investigated the impact of exposure to animal maltreatment on victims of DV. Animal maltreatment is particularly impactful for victims who have close emotional bonds with their pets and, in turn, many victims report experiencing intense feelings of guilt, rage, hopelessness, fear and grief following incidents of pet abuse (Adams, 1995; Faver & Strand, 2007). For instance, 86.4% of women in Ascione et al.’s (2007) shelter sample reported feeling “terrible” after their pets had been harmed. Similarly, harm to pets has been described as causing terror and intimidation (Flynn, 2000a); psychological trauma (Adams, 1995; Faver & Strand, 2007); anguish (Adams, 1995); and, primarily in cases of coercive sex with animals, humiliation, demoralization and disgust (Adams, 1995; Faver & Strand, 2007). Negative emotional responses are also often experienced by victims who must leave their pets with their abusive partners upon fleeing for their own safety, including worry, concern and
fear for their pets as well as guilt and remorse (Faver & Strand, 2007; Flynn, 2000b; Hardesty, Khaw, L., & Ridgway, 2013; Strand & Faver, 2005). For some victims (especially those who experience social isolation), having their pet maltreated or killed is devastating. This was the case for one woman in Fitzgerald’s (2005) qualitative study of abused women’s experiences with animal maltreatment who overdosed after her kitten was killed. The woman explained, “That cat was my last lifeline, and that was it – I snapped” (Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 121).

Less quantitative research has examined the impact of animal maltreatment on victims, and future research should explore the potential additive and/or interactive effects of concomitant DV victimization and threatened/actual harm to pets on victims and examine other outcomes in addition to emotional and psychological ones. It would also be important to assess whether exposure to different forms of animal maltreatment have differential effects on victims. Such research would provide a greater understanding of the extent to which animal maltreatment impacts victims’ well-being and functioning across multiple domains.

**Impact on children**

Given the strong bond many children have with their pets, experience of threatened or actual harm to their pets can be traumatizing for children. Similar to their mothers’ negative emotional responses, children in Ascione et al.’s (2007) shelter sample reported either being “very upset” (59.3%) or “sort of upset” (33.3%) by the animal maltreatment they observed. Similarly, in a qualitative study conducted in a western US state, mothers of children who experienced animal maltreatment and DV indicated that their children “felt extreme emotional distress and/or experienced negative emotions (e.g., sadness) when coping with maltreatment of their pet” and “responded physiologically to the emotional stress by crying during or after such incidents” (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 2638). Some children become so distressed by the abuse against their pets, they intervene during beatings to protect the animals, often putting themselves in danger (Flynn, 2000a; McDonald & Ascione, 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2019). Given these reactions, it has been recommended that children who have experienced animal maltreatment be assessed for posttraumatic stress disorder (Schaefer, 2007).

When considering children’s socioemotional functioning, children in Ascione et al.’s (2007) shelter sample were found to display more symptoms of internalizing and externalizing behaviours than children in the non-shelter sample. McDonald and colleagues (McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams 2016; McDonald et al., 2016) similarly found that children recruited from shelters who had experienced both DV and animal maltreatment were 3.22 times more likely to exhibit subclinical levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviours and 5.72 times more likely to exhibit clinical levels of these problems compared to children who experienced DV only. Despite this fact, the authors found most children (66%) were resilient and did not display significant levels of symptomatology.

In a second study by McDonald et al. (2018) using the same sample, qualitative descriptions of their experiences with animal maltreatment were compared between children who demonstrated resiliency on the socioemotional functioning measures (i.e., “asymptomatic” children) and children who exhibited some elevated level of socioemotional difficulties (i.e., children with emotional/behavioural difficulties [EBD]). Comparison of themes showed that “Asymptomatic-classified children were exposed to less severe animal-directed violence and threats than were EBD-classified children” (McDonald et al., 2018, p. 361), suggesting that animal maltreatment severity may relate to greater psychological and behavioural problems among DV-exposed children. EBD children also tended to normalize and/or justify the animal maltreatment whereas asymptomatic children did not. This suggests that exposure to animal
maltreatment may also influence children’s attributions and/or beliefs. Other researchers using this same dataset found that having a positive relationship with their pet reduced the likelihood of developing internalizing problems when controlling for exposure to animal maltreatment (Hawkins et al., 2019).

Lastly, childhood experiences of animal maltreatment can also increase children’s risk of perpetrating animal maltreatment (Baldry, 2003; Hawkins, Hawkins, & Williams, 2017; Plant, van Schaik, Gullone, & Flynn, 2016; Volant et al., 2008). Animal maltreatment perpetration prevalence among children in DV samples has ranged from 7% (Flynn, 2000b) to 32% (Ascione, 1998). Given that animal abuse may be a precursor to human-directed violence or part of a larger pattern of antisocial behaviour, children displaying such behaviours should be recommended for treatment (Becker & French, 2004; McPhedran, 2009).

**Animal abuse and help-seeking**

It is well documented that leaving an abuser is often a long, multifaceted process for survivors that is influenced by myriad psychological, structural and socio-cultural factors. Survivors’ bonds with pets further complicates the relationship termination process, particularly if pets are also the targets of violence by the abuser. In their Canadian shelter samples, Barrett and colleagues (2018) found that controlling for socio-demographic factors, relationship length and physical abuse victimization, women whose pets had been severely physically abused by their partner had a significantly higher number of previous unsuccessful attempts at leaving the relationship compared to women whose pets had not been severely harmed. Further, 56% indicated that concern for their pets prevented them from leaving earlier, and 68% believed their partner’s mistreatment of their pets impacted their final decision to terminate the relationship (Barrett et al., 2018). Similarly, a shelter-based survey in New Zealand (n=203) found that 33% remained with their abuser for fear that their pets would be harmed, 40% remained due to challenges accessing safe housing that would accommodate pets and approximately 27% would have left their partner earlier if they did not have a pet (Roguski, 2012). Importantly, the author found that participants who delayed leaving due to concerns for their pets remained in the abusive relationship a median of two years longer than they would have had they not had pets. Recent qualitative studies with both heterosexual (Newberry, 2017) and gender and sexually diverse populations (Rosenberg, Riggs, Taylor, & Fraser, 2020; Taylor, Riggs, Donovan, Signal, & Fraser, 2018) of DV survivors have also documented the powerful role that animal abuse plays in increasing motivation to leave a violent relationship. Concern for the safety and well-being of animal companions often increases one’s desire to terminate a violent relationship while simultaneously creating barriers that may hamper this process given that the vast majority of DV shelters do not have pet programmes in place. Researchers have identified numerous barriers to facilitating safe housing for survivors and their pets. Research with US DV service providers conducted by O’Neil Hageman et al. (2018) identified four key challenges: (1) survivors view pets as family members and therefore do not want to leave them behind, (2) there are inconsistencies in screening for pets during assessments and intakes, (3) safety planning for survivors with animal companions is complicated and (4) there is difficulty finding shelters and permanent housing post-shelter that allow pets. Additional barriers identified by Wuerch and colleagues (2017) in their Canadian study include challenges arranging for the transport of animals, difficulty arranging emergency housing for pets outside of regular business hours, the short-term nature of some off-site pet programmes, some programmes requiring vet and/or ownership records, the inability of women and/or DV agencies to pay for placement of animals with facilities that require fees, and a general lack of awareness of available programmes. They
also identified barriers specific to rural populations, including confidentiality concerns (i.e., a pet often identifies the survivor in small communities), limited safe housing options for larger animals, the need for protection for a multitude of animals when violence occurs in farming families, and financial dependency of farming families on animals can result in reluctance to report for fear that the animals will be removed.

Quantitative surveys have further underscored a range of barriers to effectively serving victims/survivors and their pets. In a survey of staff at 16 DV shelters in Canada, Stevenson, Fitzgerald and Barrett (2018) found over 75% of staff were aware of women in the community who had refused to come to the shelter because they could not bring their pets, yet 72% of staff indicated their organization had no questions about animals on their intake forms. Further, only one-third of staff (33.6%) stated the shelter they worked at had an official pet policy. Similarly, a national survey of 767 US DV shelters found that 45% enquired about pets during intake and 66% routinely included pets in safety planning, even though 95% of shelter staff had been made aware of pet maltreatment in shelter residents’ abusive relationships (Krienert, Walsh, Matthews, & McConkey, 2012).

DV survivors with pets may also be deterred from accessing needed services due to the lack of easily accessible information. Analysis of 337 Canadian emergency DV shelter websites found that 45.9% made any mention of animals/pets (Gray, Barrett, Fitzgerald, & Peirone, 2019). Only 3% explicitly stated that pets were welcome at the shelter, and less than 30% made any direct mention of the possibility of facilitating off-site sheltering services. Moreover, only 35% mentioned pets in the context of safety planning. This is a critical omission, as research with DV survivors with pets has identified numerous complexities that pets can pose in the safety planning process (Collins et al., 2017).

Easily accessible information about support for survivors with pets is critical because isolation is often a tactic used by DV perpetrators. In a study of 503 gender and sexually diverse respondents, DV victims/survivors who reported animal abuse had significantly lower levels of social support (Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, Donovan, & Signal, 2018). For survivors experiencing isolation, pets may be the only form of emotional support available to them. Indeed, numerous studies have documented that survivors often rely on their animal companions for comfort in dealing with their experiences of violence (Newberry, 2017; Rosenberg et al., 2020), with some even crediting their pets with giving them “reason to live” (Fitzgerald, 2007). Service providers have also identified the therapeutic benefits that animal companions afford DV survivors (O’Neil Hageman et al., 2018; Strand & Faver, 2005; Wuerch et al., 2017), leading some providers to conclude that separating women in shelter from their animal companions may be detrimental to survivors’ healing (O’Neil Hageman et al., 2018). In a Canadian sample of shelter staff, on average, participants were very supportive of pets being designated as emotional support animals in order to assist abused women, with the number of pets a staff member had during their lifetime being positively associated with increased support (Stevenson et al., 2018).

Although service providers have recognized the therapeutic value to co-housing families fleeing violence with their pets, they have also noted numerous concerns that have impeded the development of on-site co-sheltering programmes. Specific challenges include concerns that such programming may limit the ability to provide services to a greater number of survivors (families with pets may remain in temporary shelter longer due to lack of affordable and available pet-friendly housing), health and safety concerns, animal-specific fears, and possibly triggering survivors who had been traumatized by animals via their abuser (O’Neil Hageman et al., 2018). Financial and spatial barriers to programme development are also common concerns (Krienert et al., 2012). Despite being cognizant of challenges to safely co-housing pets, shelter providers have also identified numerous benefits, including removing the leverage abusers have
over their victims, decreasing the likelihood that survivors will prematurely exit the shelter due to pet care concerns and building on the therapeutic effects of the human-animal bond (Stevenson et al., 2018).

**Perpetrators of DV and animal abuse**

Although there is extensive literature examining the perpetrators of DV generally, this literature shrinks dramatically when considering concomitant animal abuse. Studies show that perpetrators of DV and animal abuse are predominantly men (Conroy, Buczycka, & Savage, 2019; Flynn, 2001; Gerbasi, 2004). Most of the research addressing the motivations and actions of perpetrators has relied on reports from victims/survivors. One of the few studies of perpetrators surveyed DV offenders (n=307) in batterer intervention programmes and found that their perpetration of animal abuse dramatically outpaced that among the general population of men (41% versus 1.5% respectively; Febres et al., 2014).

In qualitative interviews with 31 male DV perpetrators, Stevenson (2012, 2018) interrogated their relationships with their partners and pets. Participants related motives of control and dominance for their violence against their partners, including explaining that their actions were needed to respond to challenges to their masculinity. By contrast, they frequently described their relationships with companion animals as positive and valuable. Only three of the men shared that, by their own definition, they mistreated their animals. Nearly all the men reported that their companion animals represented a source of unconditional love, trust and support within their conflict-ridden relationship with their partner. Stevenson’s (2012, 2018) research illustrates the complicated nexus of DV and animal abuse in relation to the perpetrators of abuse, including that abusers can have positive relationships with animals. This may be related to ownership; all the men considered the animals ‘theirs’ as opposed to belonging to their partner. Fitzgerald (2005) raised the idea of ownership of the companion animal as a protective factor for the animal, in that abusers are less likely to target something they consider theirs. Another possible explanation for the valued nature of the animals is that the animals supported the men’s performance of masculinity, such as having a perfectly obedient dog or being a good provider or father for a companion animal, which are socially encouraged roles for men. Further research into the perceptions of perpetrators and the potential relationship to batterer sub-types is needed.

**Conclusions**

Although the body of literature is relatively young, there is now sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that animal abuse and DV commonly co-occur, at least in some national contexts (e.g., Canada, the US). While early studies focused on shelter samples were unable to draw comparisons with the general population, more recent research indicates that the level of animal maltreatment reported by women in DV shelters is significantly greater than that reported among community-based comparison groups. Moreover, recent examination of a representative sample of the Canadian population (i.e., not in DV shelters) has documented not only a relationship between animal maltreatment and DV, but also identified animal maltreatment as a significant predictor of DV severity, injury and fearing for one’s life.

There is also now substantive evidence that the presence of pets can impact help-seeking. This research has documented a consistent proportion (one-third to one-half) of participants from shelter samples reporting they delayed leaving their abuser due to concern for their pets’ well-being combined with a dearth of services for DV victims'/survivors' pets. One study has
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provided evidence that those who are at greatest risk of severe DV are also most likely to report they delayed leaving their abuser because of their pets. These findings raise significant safety concerns, which are compounded by findings documenting a desire among human victims/survivors to return to their abuser because the pets are still there. Collectively, this scholarship indicates that while the abuse of pets can be a motivator to leave an abuser, it can also be a deterrent to doing so and an incentive to returning when animals are left behind. Perhaps most troubling, some may never leave an abusive relationship because they cannot escape with their pet. Establishing how common this scenario is poses a methodological challenge and will require sampling outside of DV shelters to ascertain what can be done to mitigate barriers to help-seeking among these individuals.

Other suggestions for future lines of enquiry include pursuing larger, more representative samples to provide better insight into intersectional differences among survivors. This information would be valuable for identifying where services for sheltering the pets of DV victims/survivors are most needed and should be prioritized. Furthermore, research is needed to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the pet programme models that shelters are increasingly implementing, including on-site co-sheltering, off-site fostering, and off-site boarding. Specific questions worth exploring include: what benefits, and drawbacks, do these programmes have for the adult, child and animal victims/survivors of DV? What demands do these programmes place on staff? How does on-site programming impact those at the shelter who do not have pets for various reasons (e.g., allergies, fear, religious reasons)? Are individuals who leave with their pets able to secure long-term housing?

Additional information about perpetrators is also needed to address the following questions: are specific sub-type(s) of abusers more likely to abuse animals? Do motivations for this abuse vary by sub-type of abuser? Might abuser sub-type mediate the observed relationship between animal maltreatment and controlling, frequent and severe DV? Lastly, what is grounding the positive relationship some abusers report having with animals?

These questions notwithstanding, the work done to date is beginning to have applied impacts, including providing empirical support for the need to attend to pets when offering services to human victims/survivors. It has also been used as supportive evidence in favour of legislative interventions (e.g., changes enabling the inclusion of pets in protection orders). Examining the growing body of legal developments and providing an assessment of how they are being employed and whether an ideal model of legal protections exists constitutes another challenge to be tackled.

The most persistent challenge researchers in this area have, however, arguably faced – and continue to face – has not been an empirical one; it is, instead, confronting critiques grounded in the contention that attending to the co-occurrence of animal abuse and DV detracts from the human victims/survivors. We offer four responses to this critique as we close this chapter. First, this is not a zero-sum proposition. Spending time on the intersection of violence against animals and people does not detract from time spent on the human victims/survivors. We see it as doing service to both. Second, as discussed earlier, a large and growing proportion of the population has pets, and most consider them family members. Focusing attention here is therefore not a fanciful expenditure of resources on a small proportion of the population. Third, we suggest that research in this area can, and indeed is, having positive impacts on human victims/survivors. This empirical work has prompted policy and legislative developments to assist human victims/survivors leave abusive relationships and reduce incentives for returning – it is the type of novel work that has been called for. Finally, drawing on intersectional feminist insights about the intersection and interdependence of forms of oppression and victimization, we suggest that attending to the ways animals are also vulnerable to DV perpetrators is not only
a necessary part of engendering a greater understanding of the significance and complexities of “multispecies living” (Haraway, 2008, p. 3) – now the norm in many countries – but given that the perpetration of violence does not respect species lines, neither should research. Analyses that are truncated at the species line overlook and undertheorize the socially meaningful relationships people can have with other species, and in so doing can also render understandings of human victimization – particularly DV – incomplete.

Critical findings

- Perpetration of animal maltreatment by abusive intimate partners is commonly reported in DV shelter samples, and at a rate significantly greater than among those not exposed to DV.
- An increasing number of studies demonstrate a relationship between animal maltreatment and more frequent and severe DV.
- While some studies have found that DV perpetrators score higher on measures of controlling behaviour (as reported by human victims/survivors), a study that disaggregated forms of animal maltreatment found that while victims/survivors perceived animal neglect, emotional animal abuse and threats related to the pets as motivated by a desire to enact power/control by their perpetrator, they did not see physical animal abuse as having this same underlying motivation.
- Studies with DV shelter samples indicate that approximately one-third to two-thirds of survivors report they delayed leaving their abuser out of concern for their pets. Further, there is some evidence that those most likely to delay leaving are those most at risk for severe DV and leaving a pet with an abuser can provide incentive for returning to the relationship.
- Studies have documented significant emotional, psychological and behavioural impacts on women and children who have witnessed animal maltreatment in conjunction with DV.
- While quantitative research indicates that DV perpetrators are significantly more likely to report abusing animals as an adult compared to men in the community, qualitative interviews with perpetrators reveal self-reports of positive relationships with companion animals (primarily those ‘owned’ by them and not by others in the home).

Implications for policy, practice and research

- DV shelters should enquire about pets when contacted by victims/survivors and screen for pets during intake.
- Service providers should engage in pet-inclusive safety planning; we suggest that survivors have pet medications and vaccine records secured and accessible, have a way to safely transport pets (e.g., a carrier for cats), and have documentation of ownership and care (e.g., adoption contracts/bill of sale, copies of veterinary bills, pet food receipts).
- DV service providers should have content on their website about animal abuse and DV to reaffirm what the victims/survivors may be experiencing and to flag it for concerned bystanders. It is critical to include information about available pet care resources, and in the absence of programmes, it would be helpful to add the following: (1) a statement for concerned family/friends suggesting that they offer to care for a friend/family member’s pet if they are in a position to do so, and (2) organizations in Canada and the US could provide a link to https://safeplaceforpets.org/, a searchable map of DV shelters in Canada and the US that offer pet programmes.
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- In all communications, it is important not to frame the abuse of animals as a form of property abuse. Doing so minimizes the relationship people have with their pets and stigmatizes those who delay leaving an abusive relationship due to their pets.
- Ideally, DV shelters should develop an on-site pet programme so that abuse victims/survivors can bring their pets with them, as well as an off-site programme to accommodate pets that cannot be kept on-site, such as large animals. We recommend the allocation of government funding for setting up these programmes (the recent passage of the Pets and Women Safety [PAWS] Act in the US is a step in this direction).
- Given the common co-occurrence of animal maltreatment and DV, cross-reporting between human-focused and animal-focused organizations would be prudent.
- Information about the warning signs of DV should include animal maltreatment (and not just physical animal abuse) as a warning sign. Given the growing body of research documenting a connection between animal maltreatment and DV frequency and severity, it would also be advisable to include animal maltreatment in risk assessments for DV.
- Further development of legislation aimed at assisting DV victims/survivors leave with and protect their pets would be prudent (e.g., the ability to include pets in personal protection orders).

Notes

1 Pet ownership among particularly vulnerable sub-groups has also been documented. For survivors of IPV in need of housing, rates of animal companionship have ranged from 40% to 92% in US DV shelter samples (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000; Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007) and 64% in a Canadian shelter sample (Barrett et al., 2017, 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Animal companions are also common among shelter-seeking homeless populations, with animal companionship reported between 5% and 25% of those without permanent housing (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019).
2 We acknowledge that there is research related to the co-occurrence of animal maltreatment and DV that would likely also be of interest to readers, such as studies of shelter staff and childhood histories of animal abuse among perpetrators of DV; however, due to space constraints we have had to limit our discussion here largely to the contemporaneous co-occurrence of animal maltreatment and DV.

References


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