

SPA Policy Brief

Exploring the Link Between Animal Cruelty and Intimate Partner and Family Violence

“The link” between animal abuse and interpersonal and domestic violence is well-known, even outside the research and advocacy communities. In an exploratory study published last year in the *Journal of Family Violence*, SPA Professor Lynn Addington and coauthor Mary Lou Randour (Animal Welfare Institute) analyzed animal cruelty incidents that occurred with intimate partner (IPV) or family violence (FV), using newly available data from the FBI’s National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), extending what is known about this link.

THE LINK

The connection between animal cruelty and IPV and FV is so consistent in the research literature that the term “the link” has become accepted shorthand to describe this relationship).¹ Scholars have established 1) the frequent co-occurrence of IPV and animal cruelty in the same household,^{2,3} 2) the link between the severity of animal abuse and that faced by the intimate partner,^{3,4} 3) IPV victims’ hesitation to leave in order to maintain a safe home for their pets,⁵ and 4) patterns of FV such as child abuse and animal abuse in the same homes.⁶ While these findings help identify the link and repercussions of violence involving people and their companion animals, they focus on patterns over a period of months or years,⁷ largely ignoring specific occurrences of animal cruelty and IPV or FV and incident-level characteristics, such as relationships involved and arrest outcomes.

This omission may have resulted from a lack of available data on animal cruelty.⁸ In 2014, the FBI created the first national collection of animal cruelty data by adding these crimes to its Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program’s NIBRS.⁹ This system collects details of animal cruelty crimes reported to police including crimes that occur alongside them.⁸

RELATIONSHIP TYPES MATTER

Focusing on specific intimate and family relationships helps identify distinct patterns of—and vulnerabilities to—violence, and guides tailored interventions. Previous studies, though, tend to group relationships together somewhat inconsistently,^{10,7} for example, including IPV within FV).¹¹ When IPV and FV are treated separately, child and elder abuse traditionally dominate the FV literature. More recently, researchers have noted two additional relationship categories in need of attention:



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adolescent-to-parent and sibling violence.^{12,11}

Since little work examines incidents of animal cruelty and IPV or FV, research outside of the link helped identify relevant variables for this study, such as the relationship types and victim-perpetrator ages that impact teen dating violence and IPV among emerging adults.^{13,14} Such literature also highlights IPV and FV arrest patterns by victim demographics in light of mandatory arrest policies.^{15,16}

THE STUDY

As a result of the efforts by animal advocates, including Randour and the AWI, the FBI added animal cruelty crimes to its NIBRS data collection in 2016 and released initial statistics from law enforcement agencies a few years later. The study uses 2020 NIBRS data from the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data’s NIBRS Extract Files (US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022) to analyze 278 animal cruelty incidents that occurred with IPV or FV, via descriptive and bivariate analyses. The study explores (1) the types of animal cruelty that co-occur with IPV or FV, (2) the specific types of intimate and family relationships involved, (3) the demographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators, and (4) arrest outcomes.

In 2020, 11,506 incidents involving animal cruelty were reported in NIBRS, and 943 of these incidents (or 8.2%) occurred with another crime. For purposes of this study, IPV is measured as a violent crime (e.g., homicides, attempted and completed aggravated assaults, simple assaults, intimidations, rape/sexual assaults, and robberies) against an intimate partner. Intimate partners are defined as spouses (current, former, and common law) and boy/girlfriends (current and former). FV is considered a violent

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crime against a family member (e.g., parents, children, siblings, children of boy/girlfriends, grandparents, grandchildren, and in laws).

Variables included type of animal cruelty (i.e., intentional abuse or neglect), victim and offender characteristics (i.e., sex, race, age, number), arrest outcome, and co-occurrence with another crime. Analyses compare joint frequencies between incidents that involve both IPV and FV.

RESULTS

This study sought to explore how NIBRS animal cruelty data could improve understanding of the link. Looking at specific incidents where IPV or FV occur with animal cruelty, intentional cruelty is the most frequently observed type. This pattern highlights an important connection between cruelty (as compared to neglect) and other criminal activity that previous research has observed⁸.

This study found boyfriends/girlfriends to be the most frequently observed IPV relationship. Parents represented most FV relationships, followed by siblings. The family patterns, similar for FV that occurs with or without animal cruelty, are consistent with the growing attention to adolescent-to-parent and sibling violence¹¹ and support the need for more research on connections with animal cruelty.

Combining victim age patterns (20s and 30s) with victim-offender relationships shows the prevalence of IPV in dating relationships among younger adults and highlights animal cruelty as an aspect of this violence. In contrast, FV incidents converged around two victim age groups: teens/early 20s and 50s. Combining these age patterns with the victim-offender relationship suggests that younger victims may reflect siblings and children while older ages are parental relationships, consistent with FV that occurs outside the link.¹¹ In addition, the small number of victims over 65 or identified as grandparents needs further exploration, as they contradict previous work suggesting a link between elder abuse and animal cruelty. The percentage of arrests when IPV or FV occurs with animal cruelty far exceed those in a previous study of animal cruelty that occurred with another crime,⁸ possibly due to mandatory arrest policies for certain domestic violence incidents.¹⁵

These arrest patterns also highlight the importance of

NIBRS data to future work. A significantly higher percentage of arrests occurred alongside IPV arrests: this suggests that characteristics of animal cruelty crimes may make law enforcement officers more likely to intervene with a rigorous response (such as an arrest) as compared to IPV that occurs with other types of crimes.

KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of animal cruelty incidents co-occurring with IPV or FV end in an arrest.
- Intentional abuse is the most common type of animal cruelty for both IPV (84.6%) and FV (84.4%). In contrast, about 15% of IPV and FV incidents involved neglect.
- Parsing out specific intimate and family relationships reveals patterns similar to IPV and FV that occur with crimes outside of animal cruelty.
- Arrest patterns: For IPV involving animal cruelty, current partners are the most common relationships (boy/girlfriends, 66.3%; spouses, 18.9%), over former partners, in a pattern similar to IPV incidents that occur alongside crimes other than animal cruelty.
- Victim relationships: For FV involving animal cruelty, slightly over one-third involve parents as victims, followed by siblings (about 20%) and other family members (almost 16%), in a pattern similar to IPV incidents that occur alongside other crimes.
- Number of victims: Most incidents (97.6% of IPV and 85.3% of FV) involve only one victim, in contrast to IPV and FV that involve crimes other than animal cruelty—24.7% (IPV) and 49.1% (FV) of these involve multiple victims.
- Victim sex: For both IPV and FV, most victims are women, making up 87% of all IPV cases and 57% of all FV cases.
- Victim race: For both IPV and FV, nearly three-quarters of victims are white. The percentage of victims who are Black is higher for IPV (16%) than FV (8%).
- Victim age: For IPV, most victims (about 70%) are in their 20s and 30s. For FV, the pattern is bifurcated, with most victims in their teens and early 20s (about 25%) and in their 50s (about 18%).
- Number of offenders: Most incidents involved a single offender. Among IPV and FV that co-occur with other crimes, 10.5% and 16.4% involve multiple offenders, respectively.
- Offender sex: For both IPV (90%) and FV (80%), most offenders are men.
- Offender race: For IPV, about two-thirds of offenders are white, compared to almost three-quarters of FV offenders. The ratio of Black offenders is higher for IPV (25.4%) than FV (17.4%).
- Offender age: For IPV, most offenders (almost two-thirds) are in their late 20s and 30s. FV offenders are more commonly in their late-teens and early 20s, with half of these under 29, followed by late 30s and early 40s (about 20%).
- Arrests: A majority of IPV (66.9%) and FV (58.7%) incidents end with an arrest regardless of the accompanying crime. A higher percentage (almost 67%) of animal cruelty cases end in an arrest than those involving a different co-occurring crime (57.1%).

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

As its main contribution, this study highlights the value of NIBRS animal cruelty data to insights on the link. Other practical implications include the promise of training law enforcement officers on local victim services, including shelters and housing that take pets and the value of interagency collaboration between first responders. For example, animal control officers, who are important partners for identifying possible IPV or FV situations, can be trained to identify markers of interpersonal violence and report it to law enforcement or domestic advocates. The revelation of higher arrest rates for IPV alongside animal cruelty may encourage domestic violence groups to expand their cooperation with animal protection and humane law enforcement agencies. The patterns of arrest also suggest an opportunity to connect victims with services and provide targeted interventions for perpetrators.

Future research should 1) develop theoretical explanations for incidents of animal abuse and IPV or FV and 2) explore patterns of police response, particularly arrests. Research on FV should focus on siblings and parents of adolescents in conflicted families within, for example, a family systems theoretical framework. Finally, scholars should ask why the presence of animal cruelty crimes affects these arrest decisions, and whether greater communication between human services and animal services organizations may contribute to more effective interventions.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

- Cases of IPV and FV only can be measured by the victim-offender relationship in the current incident. Previous instances of IPV or FV cannot be identified using NIBRS data.
- Incidents must be reported to the police to be included in NIBRS. Given the nature of IPV and FV, victims may be reluctant to contact the police.¹⁷
- This study relies on 2020 data. Public health stay-at-home orders may have increased the occurrence of IPV but decreased reports to the police, with unclear effects on patterns of reported animal cruelty and IPV or FV.

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	Intimate Partner Violence		Family Violence	
	AC Incidents	Non-AC Incidents	AC Incidents	Non-AC Incidents
	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)
Arrest Made	66.9%	57.1%	58.7%	58.3%
	(113)	(43,224)	(64)	(16,964)

$N = 75,722$. $\chi^2 (1, n = 75,722) = 6.312, p < .05$ (comparing IPV arrests)

$N = 29,115$. $\chi^2 (1, n = 29,115) = 0.009, p = .92$ (comparing FV arrests)

$N = 278$; $\chi^2 (1, n = 278) = 1.902, p = .17$ (comparing IPV and FV with animal cruelty)

Table: Arrests for IPV and FV Involving Animal Cruelty and Other Crimes, 2020 NIBRS Data

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