



# The connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence: A review from the veterinary perspective



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 3 November 2016

Received in revised form 19 February 2017

Accepted 27 February 2017

### Keywords:

Animal cruelty

Domestic violence

Child abuse

Veterinary medicine

Companion animal maltreatment

## ABSTRACT

Several studies have reported a connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence. The importance of veterinarians in recognizing and intervening in the cycle of violence has been debated in different articles. This review outlines the findings about this connection around the world and describes the role veterinarians play in this field. We looked up electronic databases and analyzed articles published between 1960 and 2016. Publications were classified into three categories: area of publication, topic of the study and continent where the study had been conducted. Out of the 96 articles included, 76 (79.2%) were from North America. None were from South America or Africa. Ninety-four articles (97.9%) found some association between animal abuse and violence against people. The rates of co-occurrence between domestic violence and animal abuse reported varied between 25% and 86%. Furthermore, children who were abused, exposed to domestic violence, or animal abuse were at risk of developing criminal behavior. Veterinarians play an important role in public health and animal welfare. Yet, only seven articles (7.3%) were published in the field of veterinary medicine. Studies report that between 42.8% and 86% of veterinarians know about the “Link”. However, most veterinarians not being trained to intervene in cases of animal abuse and human violence. This emphasizes the importance of educating veterinarians about this topic and their participation in this area.

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## 1. Introduction

Investigations about the “Link”, which is the association between interpersonal violence and animal abuse, began in 1963 with the emergence of a triad of enuresis, fire-setting and animal cruelty during

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childhood and its use as an indicator of criminal behavior toward humans during adulthood (Macdonald, 1963). Thenceforth, animal protection groups and police sectors (McEwen et al., 2014) have encouraged research about the “Link” in situations of domestic violence, criminal behavior and diagnosis of conduct disorders. Human and social science research have supported the existence of this connection (Gleyzer et al., 2002; Hensley et al., 2009). Countries like the United States (USA) and Canada set more severe court sentences for crimes against animals, and increased efforts to detect and report these crimes (Arluke et al., 1999; Hensley and Tallichet, 2008; Lockwood, 2000).

The “Link”, involves different sectors of society and professionals. Some state that veterinarians are the only health professionals skilled to identify, signs of animal abuse and violence against people (Benetato et al., 2011). However, only few professionals reported suspected cases. This is due to the lack of knowledge about the topic, ethical conflicts, fears regarding the consequences of a complaint and professional confidentiality (Donley et al., 1999; Green and Gullone, 2005; Sharpe and Wittum, 1999; Williams et al., 2008).

## 2. Articles included in this review

### 2.1. Search strategy

This study examined articles published about the “Link” around the world, analyzed the participation of veterinarians in this field, and underlines the importance of training veterinarians to recognize and intervene in cases of violence.

A search of published articles was conducted on March 3, 2015 and updated January 17, 2017. We searched for relevant articles published since 1960 using Pubmed, Scopus, Science direct, Medline, Scielo, Taylor and Francis, PsycARTICLES and African Journal Online. Search terms of relevance to this review included: “animal cruelty”, “pet abuse”, “companion animal abuse”, “violence and animal cruelty” and “battered pets”.

### 2.2. Selection criteria

Studies were selected based on following inclusion criteria: (1) study in English, Spanish or Portuguese; (2) study published between January 1, 1960 and January 17, 2017; (3) original research article

about the existence of a connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence. Review and opinion articles were excluded.

The database search yielded 467 articles. After removal of duplicates, 266 studies remained. The majority of the remaining studies (74.7%) were excluded, mainly because they reported either animal abuse or violence, but not the association between both. Ninety-six articles were selected for inclusion in this review. Fig. 1 details the process of study selection.

We analyzed whether the study found an association between animal abuse and violence, and the presence of a comparison group without characteristics of violence or psychiatric disorder. Articles relating to perceptions of social service professionals and veterinarians were not included in this last analysis. Articles were classified into three categories:

*Area of publication:* human and social science, health science, or veterinary science;

*Continent where the study has been conducted:* due to the differences of cultural and in the level of publication among regions, the American continent was divided into: North America, Central America and South America;

*Classification according to the topic of the study:* according to the topic we classified the studies into the following categories: animal abuse and domestic violence; risk factors for the development of childhood animal abuse; animal abuse and the prediction of criminal behavior; and the veterinarians' role in the “Link”.

## 3. Classification of articles

### 3.1. Classification according to the area of publication

Most studies (90.6%) were from the area of human and social sciences. Two articles (2.1%) were published in the field of human health and seven (7.2%) in the area of veterinary medicine. Of these seven publications, five (71.4%) focused on the perception, education and training of veterinarians about the “Link”. This reveals the limited participation of veterinarians in this area, and the need to encourage interdisciplinary work between human sciences, social sciences, and veterinary medicine.

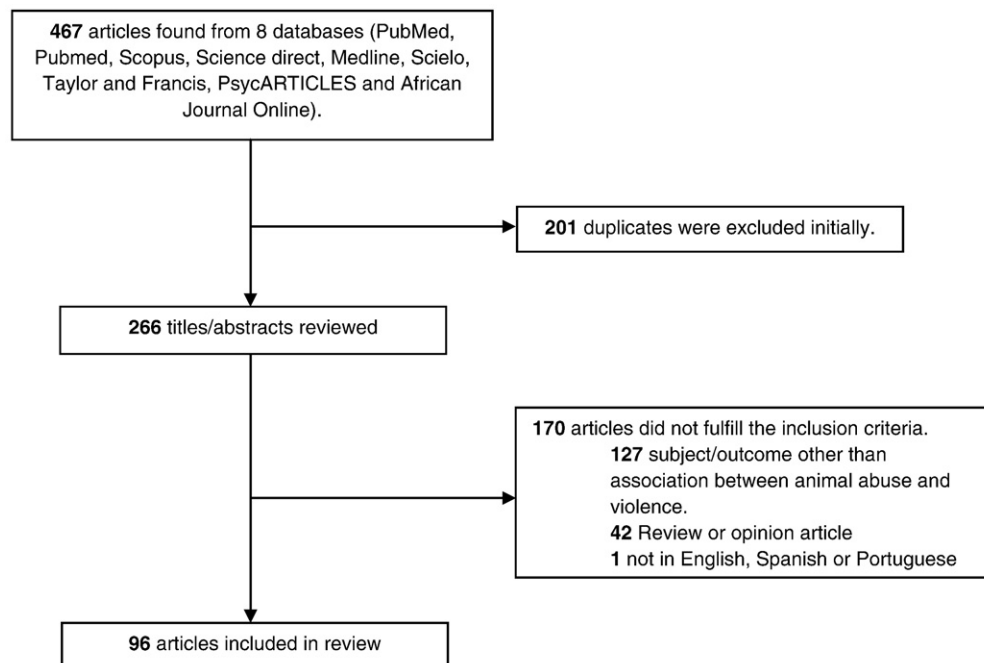


Fig. 1. Flow diagram describing article selecting.

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