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Research Article

Animal cruelty as an indicator of family trauma: Using adverse childhood experiences to look beyond child abuse and domestic violence

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ABSTRACT

Youth who engage in animal cruelty are known to be at increased risk of perpetrating violence on other people in their lives including peers, loved ones, and elder family members. These youths have often been exposed to family violence, including animal cruelty perpetrated on their beloved pets by violent adults. The current study utilizes a data set of 81,000 juvenile offenders whose adverse childhood experiences are known and includes 466 youth who self-report engaging in animal cruelty. Compared to the larger group of juvenile offenders, the children admitting to engaging in animal cruelty are younger at time of first arrest, more likely to be male, and more likely to be White. When looking at their reports of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), they are more likely than other juvenile offenders to have an array of adverse experiences beyond family violence and to have four or more ACEs. Although the youth who are cruel to animals are already troubled, the fact that they present to law enforcement at early ages provides early opportunities for intervention. Service providers outside the law enforcement field, such as teachers, physicians, veterinarians and animal control officers may be able to identify these vulnerable youth, and refer them to needed services before violence is visited on other humans.

1. Introduction

Animal cruelty can be observed or reported to child-serving adults including teachers, health professionals, veterinarians, animal control, and law enforcement. Although ample literature links animal cruelty with childhood exposure to family violence and perpetration of violence towards humans, review of a large cohort of youth who admit to animal cruelty indicates that they present to service providers earlier in life than other juvenile offenders. Because of their early encounters with youth-serving professionals, they may have more opportunities for early intervention. After discovering cruelty to animals, adults can ask, “What happened to you?” and begin a trauma informed and trauma responsive course of action for these vulnerable youths.

Cruelty to animals includes intentional and unintentional acts of abuse, neglect, torture, and abandonment of animals such as orchestrated fighting, burns, blunt force trauma, sharp force injuries, gun and projectile injuries, asphyxia and drowning, sexual abuse, and poisoning (Thompson, 2014). Acts of animal cruelty by children is one of the earliest symptoms of conduct disorder (Frick

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et al., 1993) and often a precursor to engaging in later crimes (Becker & French, 2004; Degue & Dilillo, 2009).

Children may commit acts of cruelty to animals because of curiosity or imitation of actions they have observed, their desensitization to violence, decreased empathy, or lack of attachment (Ascione, Thompson, Black, 1997; Ascione, Weber, Wood, 1997; Hensley & Tallichet, 2005). In the most extreme cases, children living in a violent household may kill an animal to prevent their pet from further torture (McDonald et al., 2015). Animal abuse during childhood is also linked to later violence and abuse of children, spouses, and elders (Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005). Theoretical constructs and empirical research have linked cruelty to animals to serial murder (Wright & Hensley, 2003).

Two of the most documented precipitants of children engaging in animal cruelty are domestic violence and child abuse. Several studies document a co-occurrence between intimate partner violence (IPV), child abuse, and animal abuse (Arluke, Levin, & Ascione, 1999; Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Degue & Dilillo, 2009; Faver & Strand, 2003). A common form of exertion of power and control in violent relationships is to threaten or harm beloved pets. Between 26% and 57% of domestic violence victims report that pets were harmed or killed by their abuser (Ascione et al., 1997; Carlisle-Frank, Frank, & Nielsen, 2004; Flynn, 2000). Additionally, animal abuse occurs in 88% of homes with child physical abuse and 34% of homes with child physical neglect or sexual abuse (DeViney, Dicker, & Lockwood, 1983). Adult perpetrators commit acts of animal cruelty to incite and perpetuate fear and submission in their victims. Harming beloved pets serves to intimidate, retaliate, punish, and isolate victims, prevent victims from leaving, or coerce return (Arkow, 2014).

Although not all child victims of domestic violence and maltreatment – either as a witness, a direct victim, or both – go on to commit acts of violence, many do (Becker, Stuewig, Herrera, & McCloskey, 2004). Approximately 32% of children exposed to domestic violence engage in animal cruelty (Ascione, Weber, Wood, 1997). Additionally, children exposed to IPV are three times more likely to be cruel to animals (Currie, 2006).

Exposure to multiple forms of abuse seems to have an additive effect: whereas 29% of children who were exposed to domestic violence only engaged in cruelty and 44% of victims of physical abuse only engaged in cruelty, 54% of child victims of domestic violence and physical abuse were cruel to animals (McEwen, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2014). Similar results were found in another study: Among children who experienced sexual abuse, the proportion who engaged in animal cruelty was higher for those who also experienced both physical abuse and exposure to DV compared to children who experienced just physical abuse, just domestic violence, or neither (Ascione, Friedrich, Heath, & Kayashi, 2003).

The demonstrated link between cruelty to animals and household violence – both maltreatment and domestic violence – is important but studies are limited. Research on the impact of cumulative stress and poly-victimization illuminates the importance of identifying children who experience multiple forms of adversity. These children experience more psychological distress than children who experience only one form of victimization, even if that one form is repeated (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). The sequelae of poor health outcomes associated with experiencing multiple forms of childhood adversity, as opposed to just one form of adversity, has been well documented in both children (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013; Flaherty et al., 2009) and adults (Felitti et al., 1998).

To date, few studies are able to describe a comprehensive trauma history of children who engage in animal cruelty. Moreover, not many studies examine the association between cruelty to animals and a history of multiple adverse experiences beyond sexual abuse, physical abuse, and domestic violence. Based on the extant studies, it appears that exposure to multiple forms of violence – intimate partner and maltreatment – puts children at greater risk for engaging in cruelty (Ascione et al., 2003; Boat, 2014; McEwen et al., 2014). Understanding how multiple forms of abuse as well as other types of adversity (e.g., having a caregiver with mental illness, caregiver with substance abuse issues, caregiver incarcerated) provide important insight into which types of childhood adversity increase the risk of perpetrating animal cruelty.

There may also be gender differences in the path from childhood trauma to animal cruelty, albeit the extant literature is limited. In general, boys are more likely to engage in animal cruelty than are girls (Ascione et al., 2003; Baldry, 2003). In addition, one study found boys who experienced physical abuse were at higher risk for engaging in cruelty whereas the co-occurrence of physical abuse and domestic violence put girls at higher risk (Ascione et al., 2003). Thus, in predicting perpetration of animal cruelty, there appears to be a gender-by-abuse type interaction.

In the current study, we extend the scientific literature on children who engage in animal cruelty by examining how cruelty may be related to multiple forms of childhood adversity. Using a sample of high-risk adolescents, the specific aims of the current study are to: (a) describe the demographic characteristics and trauma history of youth who engage in animal cruelty beyond household violence and maltreatment, (b) test the association between animal cruelty and these adversities, and (c) examine how gender moderates this trauma-cruelty association.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study is a cross-sectional, retrospective review of data on juvenile offenders. We utilize predictive modeling to assess the likelihood of engaging in animal cruelty based on history of family trauma, with acknowledgement that cross-sectional research precludes statements of causation. Although prospective designs are ideal, this study capitalizes on a unique opportunity to examine the population of juvenile offenders in a single state across 9 years. This significant sample size also provides an opportunity to identify a large sample of youth who engaged in animal cruelty that has not previously been available in the literature.

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