



# Associated factors of companion animal neglect in the family environment in Pinhais, Brazil

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## ABSTRACT

Dogs and cats are often abused within households. Despite this, little research has been developed to know the factors associated with this crime. The objective of this study was to identify the associated factors of companion animal neglect in the family environment. We followed up the records of animal abuse investigations of the Protection Animal Division of the city of Pinhais, Brazil. Socioeconomic factors about the owners and four types of indicators: nutritional, comfort, health and behavioral were considered. A binomial logistic regression model was fitted with the purpose of predicting the presence of animal neglect based on predictor variables. The number of animals in the household, disadvantageous economic conditions, the presence of disabled people and a low educational level of the owners were identified as associated factors of animal neglect. Understanding the factors related to the occurrence of animal neglect is fundamental for the development of multidisciplinary preventive strategies to reduce the occurrence of this crime.

## 1. Introduction

Multispecies households are evidence of a close relationship between humans and animals. People can create strong emotional attachments to dogs and cats (Cohen, 2002) and recognize them as family members (Flynn, 2000). In the family context, human-animal interactions may be mutually beneficial to the well-being of the individuals involved in such interplay (Faraco, 2008; Friedmann and Son, 2009; Hodgson and Darling, 2011). However, dysfunctional and negative relationships, such as animal abuse, can emerge in this environment (Hammerschmidt and Molento, 2014, 2012; Hensley et al., 2010; Nathanson, 2009; Polo et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2013).

The occurrence of companion animal abuse is a universal phenomenon, often underestimated and considered as an isolated and unimportant problem in the social context (Arkow, 2013; Vermeulen and Odendaal, 1993). Nevertheless, in recent years the societal demand to prosecute the crimes against animals has increased (Burchfield, 2016; Marlet and Maiorka, 2010). Likewise, the interest of the scientific community in investigating this type of crime and including it in the domestic violence context and in the field of public health is evident

(Allen et al., 2006; Ascione et al., 2007; Fielding, 2010).

Veterinarians have a responsibility with the promotion of the well-being of people and animals (Mardones et al., 2016) and fill critical roles in the investigation and prosecution of animal cruelty cases (Benetato et al., 2011). Determining the cause, severity and duration of animal's injuries (or death), as well as the extent to which the animal suffered or experienced pain, are important legal elements of animal abuse cases (Benetato et al., 2011). These elements cannot be established without the expertise of a veterinarian who has examined or treated these victims (Benetato et al., 2011). In this context, the role of the veterinarians includes the recognition and prevention of animal abuse to advocate for animals' welfare and/or intervene in the interpersonal violence, considering that animal abuse can serve as a sentinel of violence in society (Arkow, 2015; Monsalve et al., 2017). The highest rates of violence against women, children, young people and the elderly occur in the home environment (Costa et al., 2007; Franzin et al., 2014; Slack et al., 2011). In addition, it is known that socioeconomic, environmental, family and individual factors of the victim and the aggressor contribute to the existence of various types of abuse (Pérez-Cárceles et al., 2009; Sidebotham and Heron, 2006; Vieira et al., 2008).

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In the same way, some studies report a high occurrence of animal abuse within households (Ascione et al., 2007; Burchfield, 2016), but little attention has been directed to the identification of the factors associated with abuse of dogs and cats in the family environment. Understanding individual, family and socioeconomic factors that positively and negatively influence the human-animal bond is important for the development of multidisciplinary preventive strategies to reduce the occurrence of companion animal abuse. The objective of this study was to establish the associated factors of companion animal neglect in the family environment in the city of Pinhais, Paraná, Brazil.

## 2. Material and methods

Animal abuse investigations carried out by the Animal Protection Division of Pinhais, Paraná, Brazil, were followed up between April and December 2016. The Animal Protection Division of Pinhais records the complaints, confirms the occurrences and carries out the administrative punishment of cases of animal abuse in the municipality. Depending on the severity, intentionality and compliance of the requests, it notifies the cases to the criminal authorities.

In Pinhais, legal terms of animal abuse include physical or sexual aggression, lack of basic care and other aspects that negatively compromise animals' welfare, whether intentional or unintentional (Câmara Municipal de Pinhais, 2012; Congresso Nacional, 1998). For purposes of the present study, only complaints about neglect or physical abuse in dogs and cats within households were considered. Thus, companion animal abuse was defined as "the intentional, malicious, or irresponsible, as well as unintentional or ignorant, infliction of physiological and/or psychological pain, suffering, deprivation, and the death of a companion animal by humans" (Vermeulen and Odendaal, 1993). Furthermore, cases characterized by the failure of the caregivers to provide basic physical and mental needs were categorized as animal neglect (Merck, 2013). Ethical aspects of this study were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Paraná (SCS/UFPR).

### 2.1. Determination of the occurrence of animal abuse

A diagnosis of the animal welfare degree based on the five freedoms, was performed to determine the presence of animal neglect. The five freedoms provide the basis for the principal issues of animal abuse by addressing the main inadequacies that can cause animal suffering (Hammerschmidt and Molento, 2014; Merck, 2013). We followed up the animal abuse investigations of the Animal Protection Division of Pinhais and analyzed the records resulting from the inspection of animal and housing conditions. The protocol for the expert report on animal welfare in case of companion animal cruelty suspicion was also applied (Hammerschmidt and Molento, 2014). This protocol facilitates the recognition of animal abuse in cases where no physical lesion is present. It represents a combination of both mental state and external parameter approaches, considering also the environmental conditions provided to the pets. The presence of inadequacies was determined by giving a score (inadequate, regular or adequate) to four categories of indicators: nutritional, comfort, health and behavioral (Hammerschmidt and Molento, 2014). Only protocol indicators that directly involve the responsibility of the owner were considered (Table 1).

Since the objective of this study was not to assess individually the animal welfare degree of the dogs and cats referred to the complaints of animal abuse as indicated in the protocol, we established the inadequacies regarding the care given by their owners to the animals in each group of indicators. Thus, in the case of having more than one dog or cat in a household, a diagnosis of the group of individuals was considered, in this way registering only the lowest classification presented in the animals' evaluation in each category of indicators. We performed the ratings of the inadequacies, the welfare degree and the

**Table 1**

Indicators selected of Hammerschmidt and Molento, 2014 to evaluate the animal welfare degree in the companion animal complaints investigated by the Protection Animal Division of Pinhais, Brazil.

Type of indicator	Assessed parameters	Score
Nutritional	Body condition score lower than the ideal	Inadequate
	Body condition score higher than the ideal	Regular
	Unavailability of fresh water	Inadequate
	Problems in feed or water trough cleanliness	Regular
Comfort	Absence of permanent shelter	Inadequate
	Shelter not adequately protects from rain and sun	Regular
	No suitable surface for lying	Inadequate
	Severe movement restriction	Inadequate
	Moderate movement restriction	Regular
	Bad cleanliness condition	Inadequate
	Regular cleanliness condition	Regular
Health	Pain and/or illness signs without veterinary treatment	Inadequate
	Veterinary treatment in sick animals	Regular
	Unsupervised access to outside (only for dogs)	Regular
Behavioral	Severe behavioral restrictions	Inadequate
	Moderate behavioral restrictions	Regular
	Social isolation	Inadequate
	Evidence of stereotypes	Inadequate
	Fear to owner presence	Inadequate

occurrence of animal neglect in all the cases included in this study. After the classification of the indicators, the final decisions were integrated according to the specifications of the protocol on a scale of five degrees: very high (all groups of indicators as adequate), high (one group of indicators as regular, other groups classified as adequate), regular (two or more groups of indicators as regular, other groups classified as adequate), low (one or two groups of indicators as inadequate) and very low (three or four groups of indicators as inadequate). "Low" and "very low" were considered negative categories that represent a poor quality of life and the occurrence of animal neglect (Hammerschmidt and Molento, 2014). The cases with a report of intentional physical aggression by a family member or the neighbors with or without signs compatibles with non-accidental injuries were considered as physical animal abuse.

### 2.2. Socioeconomic profile of pet owners

In order to identify the socioeconomic profile of the pet owners, during the follow-up of the animal abuse investigations, we collected information regarding the number of residents in the household, gender, age and educational degree of the family members, employment or retirement situation of people over 18 years of age, the presence of people with physical or mental disability, financial difficulties to provide support to family members and the presence of domestic violence. To determine economic difficulties, it was considered the report of economic problems by family members or neighbors, associated with the presence of disorganization and negligence in the maintenance of housing, unhealthy environment in the home due to accumulation of rubbish and garbage for economic activities with recycled material, unemployment, receiving financial assistance from the government and/or the inability to build a physical barrier to prevent access to the property.

Specific questions about domestic violence in the family were not posed. However, the spontaneous reports of the presence of domestic violence made by family members or neighbors were recorded. Domestic violence was considered as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person who lives in or has lived in the same household, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. This category includes violence between intimate partners or ex-partners, as well as child abuse and elder abuse

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