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Legal Resource

# The Link Between Cruelty to Animals and Violence Toward Humans

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**P**eople who hurt animals don't stop with animals. There is an established link between cruelty to animals and violence toward humans — regularly referred to as “The Link.”

This link makes it critically important that cruelty toward animals be taken seriously by law enforcement, and by society at large. This is for the sake of the animals themselves, and for people who are also at risk.

## Research Shows the Link Between Cruelty to

# Animals and Toward Humans

Ample research backs up the finding that there is a direct link between acts of cruelty to animals and violence toward humans. This includes child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse and other violent behavior.

Here are just a handful of examples of the research supporting that conclusion:

A landmark 1997 study by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Northeastern University found that animal abusers are in fact five times as likely to also harm other humans.



## Animal Cruelty's Link to Other Forms of Violence

When humans or animals in a home are abused or neglected, it creates a warning signal that others in the household may not be safe. Numerous studies document multifaceted links between acts of cruelty to animals and violence toward others, including domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and other antisocial behavior. This complex web is commonly referred to as "The Link."



Despite popular perception, it is not always the case that a person will first commit animal abuse and then graduate to violence against humans. Instead, most research suggests that animal cruelty is one of several antisocial or deviant behaviors that a person may engage in concurrently or over the course of their life. Put simply, violence is violence, and those who commit violence rarely limit their victims to a single species. This means that animal abuse can be an indicator of other forms of deviant behavior and conversely, human violence may also be an indicator that animals in the home are in danger.

Too often, The Link is presented as just a means to an end, a way to compel an indifferent public to care about animal cruelty crimes. Such framing is problematic because animal cruelty crimes ought to be taken seriously in their own right—not just for their links to interpersonal violence—because animals who are victims of crime deserve justice. However, it is still important for people, particularly those working within the criminal justice system, to understand The Link because it can and should inform intervention and rehabilitation strategies.

- The Link demonstrates the need for cross-training and cross-reporting between humane agencies and social services agencies.
- The Link shows the need for intersectional services to help both animal cruelty victims and human domestic violence victims.
- Perpetrators may abuse both humans and animals as a result of the same underlying cause. Therefore treatment and rehabilitation for certain underlying issues common to domestic violence and other abuses may be useful in the animal cruelty context.

## The Link Factsheet

Download our factsheet on the link between cruelty to animals and violence toward humans.

**DOWNLOAD**

Another study, published in 2013, found that 43% of those who commit school massacres also committed acts of cruelty to animals — generally against cats and dogs.

Phil Arkow, coordinator of the National Link Coalition — a group focusing on the intersection between violence toward animals and humans — has written often about animal abuse being an indication of domestic violence, or what's called a "predictor crime."

Indeed, a 1983 study notes that animal abuse was found in 88% of homes in which physical child



abuse was being investigated.

If a child is cruel to animals, research shows it may be a sign that serious abuse or neglect has been inflicted on the child. Children who witness animal abuse are at greater risk of becoming abusers themselves.

A 2017 study showed that 89% of women who had companion animals during an abusive relationship reported that their animals were threatened, harmed, or killed by their abusive partner.

This finding is in line with other research showing that domestic violence toward pets both correlates with domestic violence toward humans, and is also a tool of domestic abuse — violent members of the household will threaten to hurt or actually hurt a companion animal as a method of control and a form of emotional violence. Indeed, more than half of women in domestic violence shelters report that they delayed their escape out of fear for their animals.



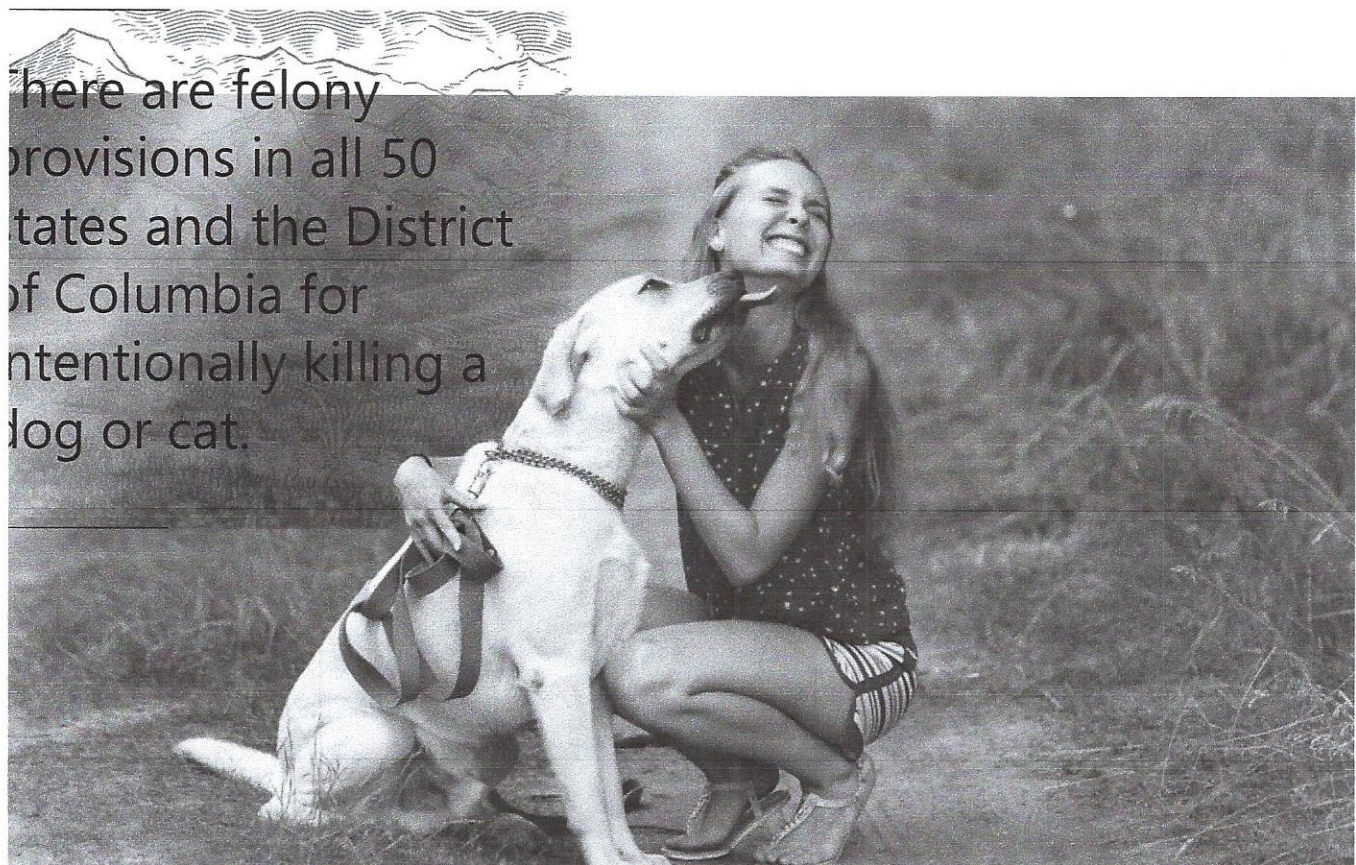
## The Law Must Protect Animals and Punish Animal Abusers

Both because animals themselves need protection, and because of the link between cruelty to animals



and cruelty to humans, violence against animals must be taken seriously under the law.

There are some ways in which the law is reflecting this seriousness. For example, all 50 states now have felony animal cruelty laws on the books. Nearly two thirds of states allow pets to be included in domestic violence protective orders. These are just among the advances we've seen at the state level in this area.



There are felony provisions in all 50 states and the District of Columbia for intentionally killing a dog or cat.

At the federal level, there is progress, too. As of 2016 the FBI began tracking crimes against animals in the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), in the same way it tracks other serious criminal offenses. This tracking will help paint a better picture of who is committing crimes against animals, and where these crimes are taking place — and will thus also help indicate where humans are also at risk.

But we are not yet at the point where cruelty to animals is consistently reported, investigated, prosecuted, or punished in ways that match the seriousness of the crime.