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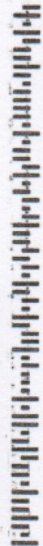page 19

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Animal Cruelty in the U.S.

What you should know and how you can help

By Dr. Julie Palais

Companion animals are an important part of the American family, with almost two-thirds of all households owning at least one dog or cat. In a Spring 2019 article by John Thompson, the current executive director of NACA, it was noted that "animal cruelty crimes occur alongside other serious offenses, such as ... domestic violence ... and illegal drug dealing."

On January 1, 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began collecting information about crimes of animal cruelty from law enforcement agencies that participate in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), the FBI's primary method for collecting, publishing, and archiving crime statistics for the nation. The first data, for the year 2016, became available on December 11, 2017.

Animal cruelty is classified by the FBI as a "crime against society," along with crimes such as drug/narcot-ics offenses, prostitution, and weapons law violations. Other crimes are classified as either "crimes against property" or "crimes against persons." Animal cruelty is defined as "Intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly taking an action that mistreats or kills any animal without just cause, such as torturing, mutilation, maiming, poisoning, or abandonment," including the failure to provide medical care if the animal is sick or injured, and failure to provide shelter, food, and water. Four types of animal cruelty are recognized, including simple/gross neglect (A), intentional cruelty (I), organized abuse/fighting (F), and animal sexual abuse (S).

This short article summarizes some preliminary analyses of the 2018 animal cruelty data. In addition to using information from the publicly available FBI NIBRS website, the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) was able to

obtain information directly from the Criminal Justice Information Service (CJIS) of the FBI. The information included the age, gender, and race of the offenders, as well as other spatio-temporal information about each incident (e.g. month, day, time of day, and location), and what other crimes occurred in association with the animal cruelty crimes (A. Schaffer, CJIS, personal communication, 2019). All other information identifying individual offenders was omitted. A few examples of the data analyses are discussed below.

Overview of 2018 NIBRS Animal Cruelty Data

Table 1 shows a summary of the number of animal cruelty offenses reported in 2018, downloaded from the NIBRS FBI website. There were 5,201 offenses reported from 29 states. The data come from 7,283 law enforcement agencies covering a total population of 117,181,806 people, or 36% of the U.S. population. Not all states are NIBRS-certified, which explains why some states have not submitted data. Other states are NIBRS-certified but are not yet contributing data on animal cruelty. Examples include Arkansas, Iowa, and Virginia. Currently only about half of all law enforcement agencies around the country participate in NIBRS, and many still use an older system to report their data. On January 1, 2021, all crime will have to be reported to the FBI in NIBRS. It is important to note that where there are zeros in the table, it does not mean that no animal cruelty crimes occurred in those states. Instead it means that no animal cruelty data were reported for that year by the state.

Although a state may be certified to report its crime data in NIBRS, it still may not be reporting incidents of animal cruelty. For example, the states' records management system (RMS) may not be up to date and may not include the new data fields for animal cruelty. Alternatively, the RMS may be capable of accepting data, but training those responsible for collecting the data may not have happened yet. Finally, a state's data will not be included in the year's summary if they only have data for only part of the year. In other words, partial years are not listed in NIBRS. Another important factor for data collection relates to whether or not animal control officers (ACO) are part of a law enforcement agency, since only law enforcement agencies can report data in NIBRS.

Spatio-Temporal Variations of Animal Cruelty

In 2015 a special issue of the journal *Crime Science* was published that featured articles about the spatio-temporal variation of crime. The articles published in that special issue looked at crime events in both space and time. Whereas much of the previous literature had looked at the location where crimes had occurred and patterns of crime "hot spots," very little had been done regarding the temporal variations in crime patterns. Below are just a few examples of analyses looking at how incidents of animal cruelty vary by location, time of the year, and time of day. The age of animal cruelty offenders as a function of the time of day that they are most often involved in crimes involving animal cruelty was also examined.

Figure 1 (page 21) is a summary of the most common locations where animal cruelty offenses occur. The majority (68%) of all offenses occur in a residential or home setting. Other less common locations for animal cruelty include roads, parking lots, fields/woods, farms, stores, public buildings, parks/playgrounds, office buildings, and all other or unknown locations. This highlights the importance of paying attention to calls from the public, from single-family homes or other residential

Table 1: Number of Animal Cruelty Incidents by state from the FBI NIBRS website and number of agencies reporting animal cruelty

Reporting Animal Cruelty	
State/Year	2018
# of agencies	7283
Total #	5201
DE	1097
CO	782
TN	463
OR	421
MI	398
TX	393
SC	295
KY	186
NH	173
WI	154
WA	128
OH	102
MT	92
ND	81
CT	74
MN	61
HI	50
MS	47
MA	44
MO	43
VT	41
SD	24
ME	13
WV	11
ID	7

States reporting 5 or fewer incidents in 2018: RI (5), AL (2), AZ (2), NE (1), AR (0), GA (0), IL (0), IN (0), IA (0), KS (0), LA (0), MD (0), OK (0), PA (0), UT (0)

*States not NIBRS-certified: (AK, CA, FL, NC, NJ, NV, NY, WY)

settings such as apartment complexes.

Figure 2 shows the month-to-month variations of animal cruelty, with a peak during the summer months. Previous studies of crime have shown robust seasonal trends in crime victimization, with many crimes against persons and property happening during the summer.

Figure 3 (page 22) illustrates the time of day when animal cruelty offenses occurred during 2018. There is a distinct peak around midday and a smaller secondary peak in the mid- to late afternoon. Previous studies of, for example, juvenile sexual victimizations have shown "distinct time periods" when most incidents occurred, with more than "57% of offenses occurring between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m." and "peaks around both meal and snack times," analogous to the temporal pattern of animal cruelty offenses. More studies are needed to see if this pattern persists and how it relates to the timing of other crime.

While there is still a lot to understand about these types of temporal analyses, including whether there could be any artifacts in the data, it is worth noting that temporal signature charts of other types of crimes show very different patterns in the time of day when crimes occur. Using this information, along with the other data available in NIBRS, can help agencies with their staffing plans and can help ACOs and law enforcement agencies work more closely together to solve crimes in the community.

Age of Animal Cruelty Offenders

Figure 4 (page 23) is a plot of the number of animal cruelty offenses in different age groups vs. time of day. Younger animal cruelty offenders, especially in the age range of 20–30, seem to commit more crimes between about

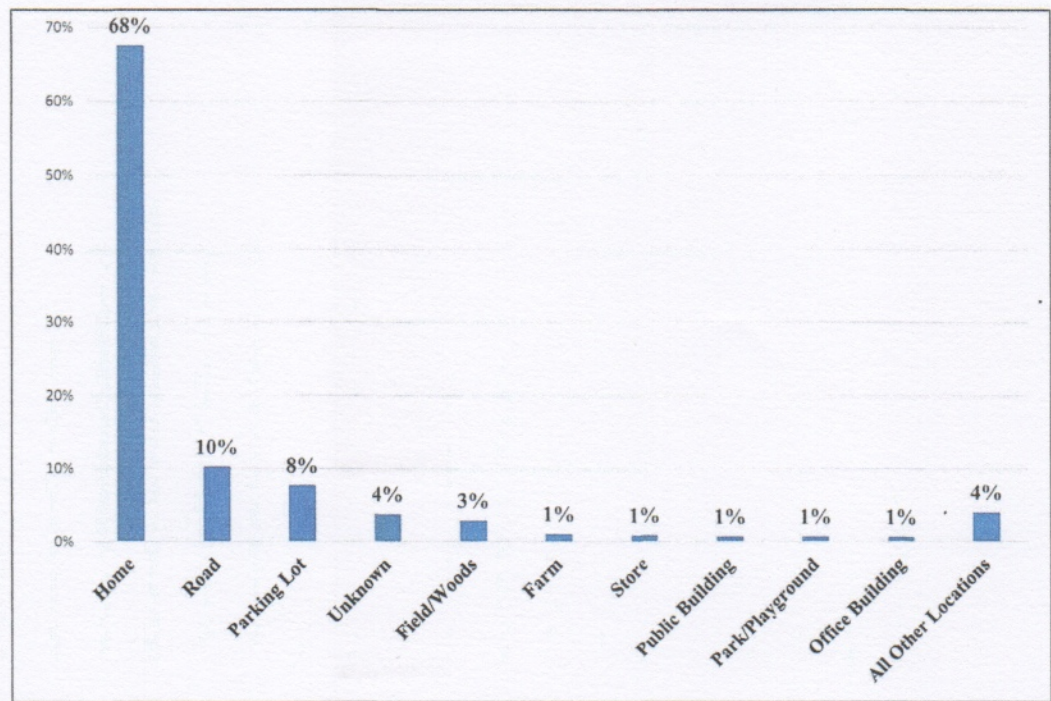Figure 1: Most Common Locations of Animal Cruelty Offenses

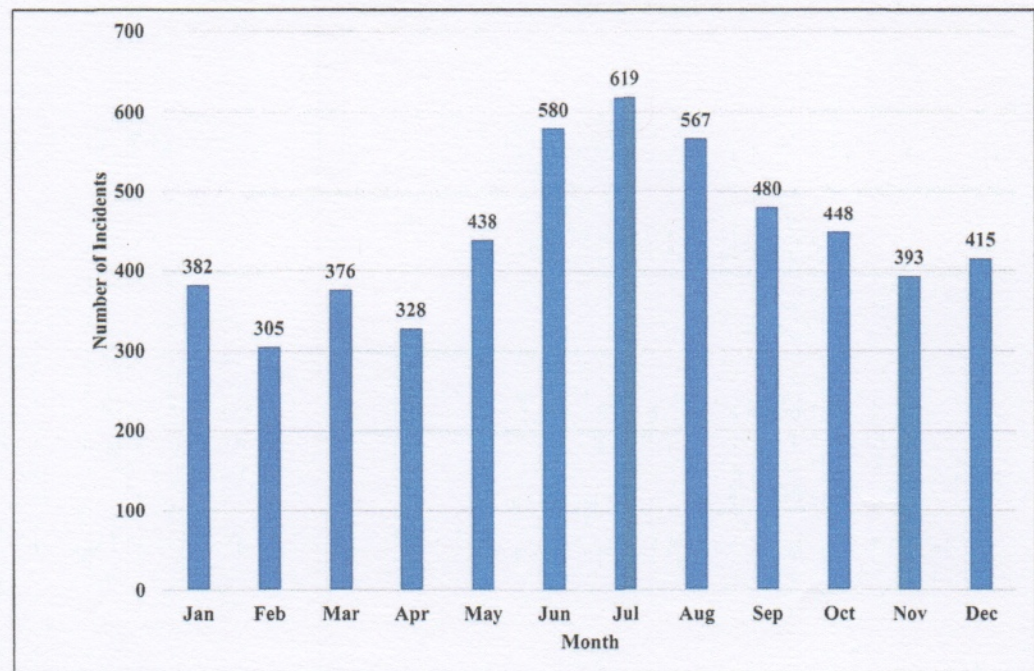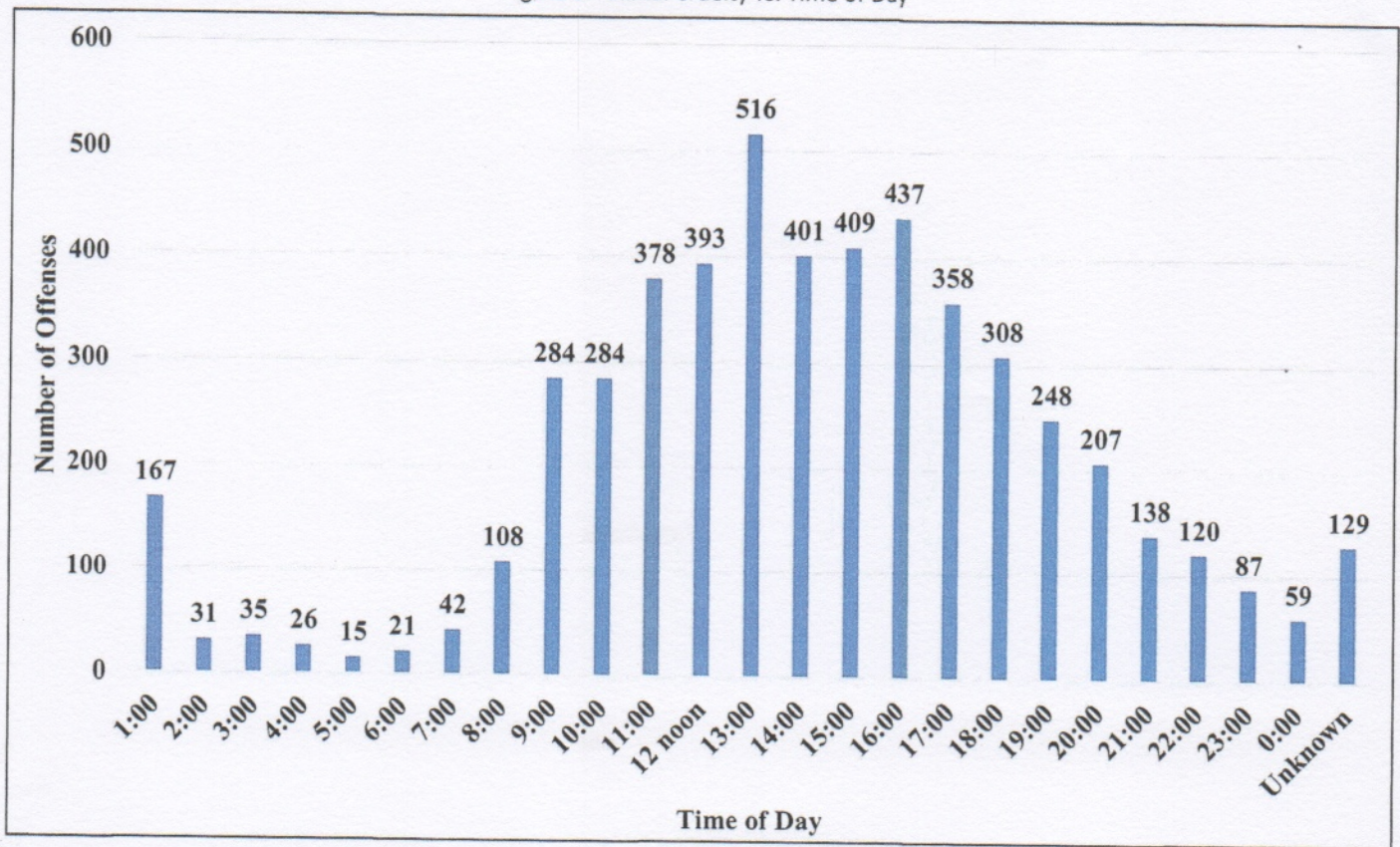Figure 2: Number of Animal Cruelty Offenses Per Month in 2018

Figure 3: Animal Cruelty vs. Time of Day

(continued from page 21)

7 a.m. and 11 a.m., and again in the late afternoon around 6 p.m. While it is still premature to draw too many conclusions from one year's worth of data when only a little over a third of the U.S. population is covered by the data, these figures illustrate how one might use this information to provide guidance to animal control agencies about the most important times of day to have the animal control officers on duty.
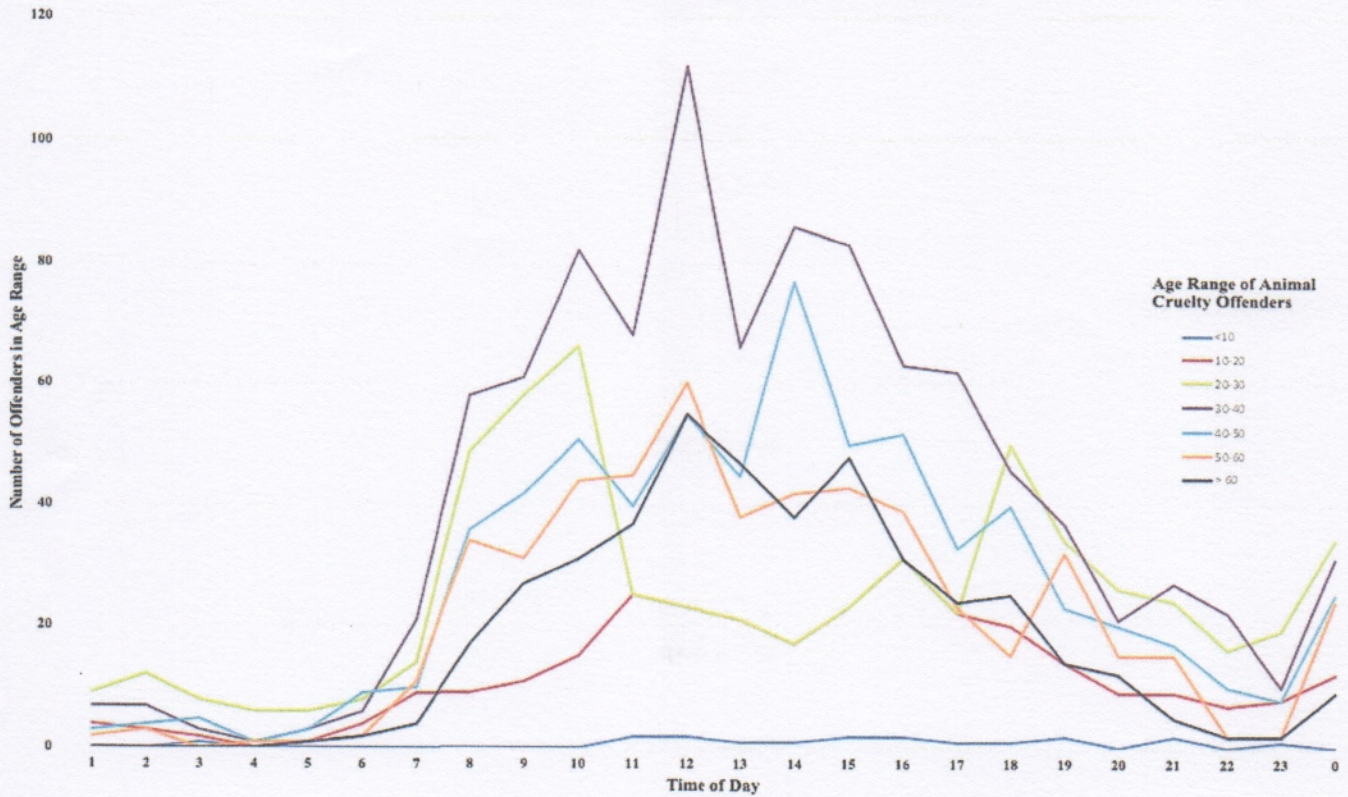
How Can You Help?

A survey in 2012 by Randour and Addington concluded that only about half of all animal control officers (ACOs) across the country work in law enforcement agencies. That is important, since only law enforcement agencies with Originating Agency Identifier (ORI) numbers can submit incident reports to the FBI in NIBRS. Therefore, unless an animal control agency has an existing working relationship with a law enforcement agency in their community, it is unlikely that the data that they collect will make it into the NIBRS database. The survey mentioned above also found that, of those animal control organizations that were not part of law enforcement, the majority were part of humane societies, or more rarely they were located in health departments or the state's department of agriculture.

If you are an ACO and you do not work within a law enforcement agency already, please contact your local police or sheriff's department to find out if you can work together so that when you respond to a call involving animal cruelty, the information makes it into your state's NIBRS database. If you need a sample memorandum of understanding (MOU) for working with another agency, AWI has a template you can use. There are people who are interested in examining this nationwide data on animal cruelty crimes, and if the incidents that you are responding to go undocumented, then the results of studies like these will be incomplete. Another important point to remember is that the incident does not have to end in an arrest for the incident to be recorded in NIBRS. For more information you can contact Dr. Mary Lou Randour, senior adviser of animal cruelty programs and training at AWI (marylou@awionline.org).

Julie M. Palais has an M.S. and Ph.D. in earth science from The Ohio State University and was a program director at the National Science Foundation (a U.S. government agency) 1990–2016. After her retirement in 2016 she completed a second master's degree (in 2019) in anthrozoology (human-animal studies) from Canisius College in Buffalo, New York. She completed a short internship at the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) in the spring of 2019 and has been doing some part-time consulting with AWI on the analysis of the recent animal cruelty data from NIBRS. ❖

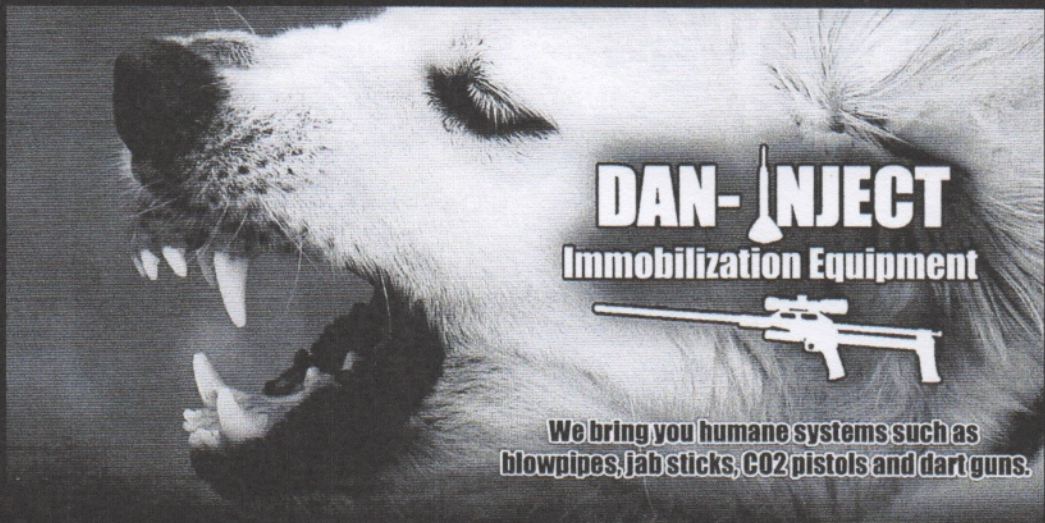Figure 4: Animal Cruelty vs. Time of Day by Offender Age