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Intimate Partner Violence and Concern for Animal Care and Safekeeping: Experiences of Service Providers in Canada

Abstract

The present study examined the experiences of animal welfare and intimate partner violence service providers living in urban, rural, and northern communities in Saskatchewan, Canada. Two online surveys were distributed among animal welfare and intimate partner violence service providers across the province. Quantitative and qualitative information was obtained to further understand how concern for animal care and safekeeping impacts the decision to leave an abusive relationship. The questions asked in the online surveys were designed, reviewed, and revised based on feedback from a community-based project advisory team. Descriptive statistics and detailed comments highlighted important findings and suggestions for improvement. Findings suggest that concern for animal care and safekeeping creates challenges for individuals leaving abusive partners, especially those living in rural and northern communities, and further demonstrate the importance of collaboration between animal welfare and intimate partner violence service providers. Further research is warranted to inform and improve the development and implementation of national support services and resources.

Intimate Partner Violence and Concern for Animal Care and Safekeeping: Experiences of Service Providers in Canada

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and animal abuse often intersect. Many pet-owning IPV survivors report that their partners have threatened or harmed their pets, often as a way to coerce, control, isolate, or seek revenge over their partners (Allen, Gallagher, & Jones, 2006; Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett, Fitzgerald, Stevenson, & Cheung, 2017; Collins et al., 2018; Hartman, Hageman, Williams, & Ascione, 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; Newberry, 2017; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2012; Wuerch, Giesbrecht, Price, Knutson, & Wach, 2017). Pet-owning IPV survivors are 11 times and 4 to 5 times more likely to report that their partner has hurt or threatened their pets, respectively, compared with pet-owning women who report not experiencing IPV (Ascione et al., 2007; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008). Animal abuse and concern for animal care and safekeeping also impacts IPV survivors' decisions to remain with or return to an abusive partner, or to seek shelter support because of (a) fear that something negative may happen to their animals if they leave, (b) the emotional connection and support that pets provide women and their children (in IPV situations and otherwise), and (c) limited awareness or accessibility of formal or informal accommodation for animals (Barrett et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2018; Hartman et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; Newberry, 2017; Stevenson, Fitzgerald, & Barrett, 2018; Wuerch et al., 2017).

Barriers to animal care and safekeeping may be especially pronounced in rural and northern areas, but few studies have examined this context to date. Limited research suggests that rural and northern regions often have few shelters and animal safekeeping resources, and those that are available in nearby urban settings are often inaccessible to rural individuals (Wuerch et al., 2017). Moreover, in addition to pets, individuals in rural and northern regions often own larger farm animals or livestock that they rely on for financial security and livelihood, which creates additional barriers to leaving (Wuerch et al., 2017). This brief report details a community-based research project that contributes to this small body of work by examining the current state of animal safekeeping among animal welfare and IPV service providers in urban, rural, and northern communities in Saskatchewan, Canada, as well as challenges and promising practices.

Method

Procedure

Upon approval from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board, two online surveys hosted through SurveyMonkey were utilized: one with animal welfare providers (from Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [SPCAs], humane societies, and veterinary clinics) and one with IPV service providers (from IPV shelters/transition houses, family violence outreach services, and victim services) in urban, rural, and northern regions of Saskatchewan, Canada. Appointed contacts from these sectors sent a recruitment email to available listservs, followed by an email with the survey link to those who expressed interest. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was provided. In a second part of this study (reported elsewhere; Wuerch et al., 2017), semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a subset of the current sample.

Both surveys contained a consent form, followed by demographic questions and questions about experiences working with individuals leaving IPV situations who had concern for animal care.

The IPV service provider survey contained 17 open- and closed-ended questions and asked about perceptions of the prevalence and impact of concern for animal safekeeping when working with IPV survivors, practical implications (e.g., transportation, access to animals while in care), and partnerships with animal welfare organizations. The animal welfare provider survey contained 21 open- and closed-ended questions and asked about knowledge of requests to provide or facilitate temporary animal safekeeping for individuals leaving IPV situations, ability to accommodate animals, practical implications (e.g., transportation, access to animals while in care), and partnerships with IPV organizations. Both surveys contained questions about existing challenges, potential improvements, and promising practices for animal safekeeping. We analyzed descriptive statistics for the closed-ended questions and summarized qualitative information from the open-ended questions to supplement the quantitative results. Some participants skipped questions that did not apply to them; thus, percentages are reported based on the number of participants who responded to each question rather than the total sample size.

Participants

Fifty-one IPV service providers and 32 animal welfare providers completed the surveys (N = 83). Participants worked with IPV shelters and victim advocacy (n = 35), specialized victim services (n = 14), parent mentoring and education (n = 2), SPCAs or humane societies (n = 11), veterinarian clinics (n = 19), and food inspection agencies (n = 2). Of the IPV service providers, 18 (35.29%) worked in their current position for 0 to 5 years, 14 (27.45%) for 6 to 10 years, seven (13.73%) for 11 to 15 years, seven (13.73%) for 16 to 20 years, and five (9.80%) for 20 or more years. Twenty-eight (54.90%) worked in an urban location, 17 (33.33%) in a rural location, three (5.88%) in a northern location,¹ and three (5.88%) in an unknown location. Of the animal welfare providers, seven (21.88%) worked in their current position for 0 to 5 years, eight (25.0%) for 6 to 10 years, five (15.63%) for 11 to 15 years, one (3.13%) for 16 to 20 years, and 11 (34.38%) for 20 or more years. Eighteen (56.25%) worked in an urban location, 11 (34.38%) in a rural location, and three (9.38%) in a northern location.

Results

IPV Service Providers: Current State of Animal Safekeeping

Nearly all IPV service providers (n = 47, 95.92%) reported that, in their experience, concern for animal care and safekeeping impacts an individual's planning and decision making to leave an abusive partner; the remaining two (4.08%) were unsure. Most (n = 38, 77.55%) were aware of individuals who did not leave an abusive partner due to concern for animals; the remaining 11 (22.45%) were unsure. Over half (n = 32, 65.31%) reported that their agency asks about animal safety; the remaining 17 (34.59%) reported that their agency does not ask. Similarly, over half reported that their agency helps plan for temporary animal safekeeping if needed (n = 27, 56.25%); 18 (37.50%) reported that their agency does not but would like to; and three (6.25%)

¹ We defined: (a) urban as centres consisting of a population over 30,000 (a modified version of Statistics Canada's 2016 definition); (b) rural as all regions outside of population centres and "with a population of less than 30,000 that are greater than 30 minutes away in travel time from a community with a population of more than 30,000" (a modified version of Statistics Canada's 2016 definition based on Rural and Northern Health Care Panel, 2011, p. 8); and (c) northern as all communities in the Northern Administration District, Division No. 18, which consists of about 45 communities in northern Saskatchewan (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2015).

reported that this is not relevant to their job.

All 31 respondents who helped plan for temporary animal safekeeping reported being asked by clients to assist with companion animals (n = 31, 100%), followed by livestock (n = 8, 25.81%) and service animals (n = 5, 16.13%). None reported having never received a request. Most indicated that their agency is not able to transport animals (n = 28, 62.22%) or that their ability to transport is dependent on the type, size, and number of animals (n = 15, 33.33%); the remaining two (6.90%) reported that their agency is able to transport animals. Only seven (15.56%) reported that their agency is able to effectively assist with animal safekeeping; the remainder reported that their agency is somewhat able (n = 21, 46.67%) or not able (n = 17, 37.78%). Similarly, most (n = 28, 58.33%) reported that there is not adequate access to animal safekeeping supports in their area, 16 (33.33%) were unsure, and four (8.33%) reported that there is adequate access. Responses were similar across urban, rural, and northern areas.

Less than half of the IPV service providers (n = 21, 46.67%) reported that their agency works in some capacity with animal welfare organizations, including SPCAs, humane societies, and nonprofit animal rescues. One participant noted that her shelter is currently in the early stages of building a formal partnership with the local SPCA to establish an animal safekeeping program to support survivors of IPV. The remaining 24 (53.33%) reported that their agency does not work with animal welfare organizations. Finally, most (n = 38, 79.17%) reported wanting more information and training about animal safekeeping and IPV, including information about animal welfare networks in their area (n = 31, 81.58%), information about supporting someone to plan for animal safekeeping (n = 31, 81.58%), and training about animal safety and IPV (n = 27, 71.05%). The remaining 10 (20.83%) reported that this was not relevant to their agency.

Animal Welfare Service Providers: Current State of Animal Safekeeping

Most animal welfare providers (n = 26, 83.87%) reported that their agency provides or facilitates temporary care for animals; the remaining five (16.13%) reported that their agency does not. They noted that their agency is able to accommodate companion animals (n = 23, 85.19%) or livestock (n = 4, 14.81%), with others indicating that this ability depended on the type, size, and number of animals (n = 7, 25.93%). Ten (37.04%) reported that they were able to accommodate temporary care for a few days to 1 week, two (7.41%) reported 2 weeks to 2 months, two (7.41%) reported 3 to 6 months, four (14.81%) reported 6 or more months, and nine (33.33%) reported “other.” Participants who chose “other” noted that their ability to accommodate for a certain timeframe depended on various circumstances (e.g., until IPV survivor finds a home, space availability, reason for accommodation). Only three (20.00%) reported that their agency is not able to transport animals for safekeeping; another three (20.00%) reported that their agency is able and nine (60.00%) reported that this ability depended on the type, size, and number of animals. Nearly half who responded to this question indicated that owners have access to their animals while in temporary care (n = 10, 43.48%) or that this is dependent on the circumstances of the situation (n = 11, 47.83%; for example, what is best for the animal, police and court involvement, demeanor of owner, where animal is placed, and if confidentiality for foster homes and volunteers is required); the remaining two (8.70%) reported that owners do not have access to their animals.

IPV and animal safekeeping. Ten (37.04%) animal welfare providers reported that their agency has been requested to provide or facilitate temporary care or safekeeping for individuals leaving abusive partners, five (18.52%) reported that their agency does not but would like to, and 12 (44.44%) reported that this is not relevant to their agency. Of those who reported that their agency has been requested to provide or facilitate this care, most reported that their agency has been asked to assist with companion animals (90.00%) and one (10.00%) reported livestock. Only five (33.33%) reported that their agency is able to effectively assist with animal safekeeping in interpersonal violence situations; the remainder reported that their agency is somewhat able (n = 7, 46.67%) or not able (n = 3, 20.00%). Similarly, most (n = 19, 73.08%) reported that there is not adequate access to animal safekeeping supports in their area to assist those leaving an abusive partner; the remaining seven (26.92%) reported that there is.

Nearly half (n = 15, 55.56%) were aware of other formal or informal temporary animal care services in their area (e.g., humane societies, nonprofit animal rescues, animal foster homes, veterinary clinics, SPCAs, boarding kennels, livestock yards); the remaining 12 (44.44%) were not. Only six (23.08%) reported that their agency works with IPV shelters or other IPV services in their area; the remaining 20 (76.92%) reported that their agency does not. Finally, half (n = 13, 50.00%) reported wanting more information or training about animal safekeeping and interpersonal violence, including training about animal safety and IPV (n = 11, 84.62%), information about IPV services in their area (n = 10, 76.92%), and information about helping someone plan for animal safekeeping (n = 7, 53.85%). The other half reported that this was not relevant to their agency.

Challenges to Animal Care and Safekeeping

Animal welfare and IPV service providers reported similar challenges in providing or helping to find/arrange temporary animal care, including (a) shelters not allowing animals (e.g., lease or shelter restrictions) or not having space for animals, (b) difficulty housing larger animals, (c) animal welfare agencies operating at full capacity, (d) limited availability of animal foster homes or anonymity concerns, (e) certain programming only being available in urban areas, (f) lack of transportation for animals from rural areas, (g) financial barriers (e.g., boarding costs), (h) safety and legal concerns (e.g., animal health concerns, animals not being up-to-date with vaccinations, aggressive behavior), and (i) challenges managing contact with and inquiries from the animal's owners (i.e., IPV victim and perpetrator).

Potential Promising Practices

More than half of the IPV service providers (n = 11, 55.0%) and the animal welfare providers (n = 6, 60.0%) reported being unaware of any promising programs or practices related to animal safekeeping and IPV. However, some listed specific programs they were aware of, including (a) formal programs such as the Safe Places Program offered by the Regina Humane Society and the Pet Safekeeping Program offered by the Alberta SPCA, and (b) informal supports, particularly in rural and northern regions, such as friends and family, boarding kennels, and rescue shelters. Additional suggestions for improving animal safekeeping responses and supports available to those seeking refuge, such as (a) increasing service provider knowledge of available services, (b) increasing staff and funding resources for animal safekeeping (e.g., emergency funding for animal care, recruiting more volunteers), (c) creating new or improving existing programs (e.g.,

increasing animal welfare placement options, expanding shelter space and allowing animals to stay in shelters with their owners or in nearby buildings, creating facilities to house livestock such as pens and corral areas), (d) establishing reliable and consistent interagency collaboration and/or implementing a structured referral process for animal care, (e) developing formal agreements to handle livestock requests (e.g., stockyard, other farmers, neighbors, volunteers), and (f) improving safety procedures (anonymity procedures to protect animal foster homes, safety procedures for staff and volunteers picking up/sheltering animals).

Discussion

Our results support previous research suggesting that concern for animal care and safekeeping impacts IPV survivors' decisions to remain with or return to an abusive partner and/or to seek shelter support (e.g., Barrett et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2018; Hartman et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2018; Wuerch et al., 2017). Moreover, most service providers in our study reported that their agencies were unable to effectively assist with animal safekeeping and that there was inadequate access to animal safekeeping supports in their area to assist those leaving an abusive partner. This is concerning and may pose serious risks to women's safety, especially given some evidence suggesting that women who report animal abuse and mistreatment are at significantly greater risk of more frequent and severe IPV (Barrett et al., 2017; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). Nevertheless, our participants offered some practical suggestions—including increased funding and resources, policy improvements, and collaboration between animal welfare and IPV service providers—that may help improve animal safekeeping access and delivery within Canada. While some of these suggestions (e.g., increased shelter space) would require additional funding, others (e.g., structured referral process, collaboration, and formal agreements) could be implemented with less financial investment.

Our findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, despite receiving a high response rate from IPV and animal welfare service providers in Saskatchewan, our sample size limits the generalizability of the current research to outside contexts. Second, some questions relied on secondhand knowledge of animal abuse and barriers to animal safekeeping; however, our findings generally support past research with IPV service providers and survivors. Finally, given past research suggesting that concern for animal safekeeping often prevents IPV survivors from leaving their abusive partner or accessing support (Ascione et al., 2007; Collins et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; Newberry, 2017; Tiplady et al., 2012; Wuerch et al., 2017), many IPV survivors with animals likely did not come to the attention of our participants, suggesting that the issue at hand may be more prevalent and graver than our results suggest.

Despite these limitations, our study has raised awareness on the link between IPV and concern for animal safekeeping in a Canadian context and has important implications for the future of IPV and animal welfare service delivery. For example, joint training for animal welfare and IPV service providers may have the twofold outcome of providing needed training for each and facilitating collaboration and shared knowledge about the link between IPV and animal abuse (e.g., indicators of animal abuse/IPV, appropriate interventions, legal issues around animal ownership). Future research is needed to examine the outcomes and effectiveness of programs that are already implementing some of the strategies our participants proposed, notably pet-friendly IPV shelters, as well as strategies that work in different settings and scenarios (e.g.,

urban vs. rural communities, companion vs. farm animals), to provide further understanding into the unique challenges faced in geographically diverse communities.

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