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Abstract

While research on the link between intimate partner violence (IPV), animal maltreatment, and the need for animal safekeeping has increased significantly in recent years, previous research has included samples of victims/survivors and service providers. The present study examined public awareness of the link between IPV, animal abuse, and the need for animal safekeeping. The study also examined awareness of services and supports and inquired about respondents' experiences with animal safekeeping in situations of IPV through an online survey that was open to the public. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions and asked about three types of animals: pets, livestock, and service animals. Respondents were 176 residents of Saskatchewan who live in urban, rural, and northern areas of the province. Findings indicate that many respondents knew people who experienced IPV where their animals were also abused. Several respondents had assisted someone in planning for temporary animal safekeeping as part of their plan to exit a relationship when they were experiencing IPV. These results demonstrate the importance of “natural supports,” including family, friends, and neighbors, for providing information, support, and assistance with animal safekeeping in situations of IPV, especially in rural and northern communities that do not have domestic violence and animal welfare agencies nearby. Findings also indicate public support for increasing services and supports for people who experience IPV and own animals, including pet-friendly domestic violence shelters and rental housing, to allow people and animals escaping IPV to remain together.

Brief Note—Intimate Partner Violence, Animal Maltreatment, and Animal Safekeeping:**Findings from a Public Survey**

Research has demonstrated that animals are often also abused by perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2018, 2020; Collins et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Krienert et al., 2012; McDonald et al., 2015; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2018). Children are at high risk of victimization in homes where IPV and animal abuse are occurring and are negatively impacted when they are exposed to IPV and animal abuse (Arkow, 2003; Ascione et al., 2007; Crawford & Bohac Clarke, 2012; Krienert et al., 2012; McDonald et al. 2015; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007).

Research has demonstrated that care for animals impacts decision-making in situations of IPV. In some cases, victims/survivors of IPV may delay ending relationships because of responsibility for animals, especially when they feel they will not be able to take their animals with them or keep the animals after separation. For others, concern for animals is a catalyst in their decision to end the relationship and escape with their pet (Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2018, 2020; Collins et al., 2018; Giesbrecht, 2021a, 2021b; Stevenson et al., 2018; Wuerch et al., 2020, 2021).

Previous research on the link between IPV and animal abuse has most often included survivors of IPV recruited from domestic violence shelters (Ascione et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2018, 2020; Collins et al., 2018; Crawford & Bohac Clarke, 2012; Doherty & Hornosty, 2008; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Hardesty et al., 2013; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). Other studies have explored service providers' experience with the link, including professionals from domestic violence shelters (Ascione et al., 1997; Krienert et al., 2012, Stevenson et al., 2018), animal welfare professionals (Green & Gallone, 2005; Sharpe & Wittum, 1999; Williams et al., 2008) or both (Crawford & Bohac Clarke, 2012; Giesbrecht, 2021a; Wuerch, 2020, 2021).

The goal of the present study was to examine public perceptions of and experience with the link between IPV and animal abuse and the need for animal safekeeping, including pets, livestock, and service animals. Saskatchewan's population is more rural than the national average with 35.6% of residents living outside a census metropolitan area (Statistics Canada, 2017). Therefore, the study aimed to elicit responses from those in rural and northern communities, as well as urban centres. The rate of police-reported IPV (724 victims per 100,000 population) in Saskatchewan is over double the national rate (344 victims per 100,000) (Conroy, 2021).

Method

This survey was part of a larger mixed-methods study which included surveys for victims/survivors of IPV who owned animals (Giesbrecht, 2021b), human service professionals, and animal welfare professionals (Giesbrecht, 2021a), and interviews with survivors. The study was approved by the University of Regina's Research Ethics Board. The online surveys were launched on January 3, 2020, and closed on March 31, 2020.

The present study consisted of an online survey that was open to the public and included quantitative and qualitative questions. The surveys inquired about three kinds of animals: pets, livestock, and service animals and provided a definition for each. A definition of IPV was also included at the beginning of the survey. Respondents were asked a series of yes/no/not sure questions to gauge awareness of the link between IPV, animal abuse, and the need for animal safekeeping; awareness of services and supports; and inquire about their experiences with animal safekeeping in situations of IPV.

The recruitment poster was posted on the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan's (PATHS) and the Saskatchewan Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Animals' (SPCA) websites and social media accounts and shared in the organizations' email newsletters. Information about the study was shared in radio and print stories by media outlets in Saskatchewan. The public survey was open at the same time as the surveys for survivors and service providers. The link in the invitation to participate took respondents to a landing page on PATHS' website where links to the surveys were posted; respondents self-identified which survey to respond to (animal welfare service provider, human service provider, survivor, or public).

Findings

Responses were received from 176 residents of Saskatchewan. Respondents provided the first three digits of their postal code to indicate their location: 8% lived in northern Saskatchewan, and 21% resided in a rural area.

Quantitative Findings

Nearly all respondents (92.6%) responded "yes" to a question that asked if they agreed with the statement "When animals are abused, people are at risk. When people are abused, animals are at risk" (Arkow, 2013). Respondents were asked if they felt that the safety and safekeeping of animals could impact an individual's planning and decision making to leave a relationship when they are experiencing IPV—86.9% agreed that it can, and an additional 9.7% were unsure. When asked if they felt that concerns for the safety and safekeeping of animals prevent individuals from leaving relationships where IPV is taking place, 81.7% said yes, and 14.3% were unsure.

When asked if, in their opinion, there were adequate access to animal safekeeping supports in their area to assist individuals in leaving relationships when they are experiencing

IPV, the greatest number (57.5%) said no. An additional 37.8% were not sure, and only 5.8% felt that there were.

Over forty percent (42.3%) of respondents stated that they had known someone who experienced IPV where their animals were also abused, neglected, or maltreated. Nearly one-fifth (19.4%) had assisted someone in planning for temporary animal safekeeping as part of their plan to leave a relationship where they were experiencing IPV. The majority (18.8%) had assisted with safekeeping for pets; 1.7% had assisted with livestock, and 0.6% had helped with a service animal.

Qualitative Findings

Experience with the Link

In qualitative responses, participants shared examples of situations they were aware of where someone who experienced IPV also experienced their animals being harmed or mistreated. These examples included respondents' childhood experiences of IPV and animal abuse and illustrations of abuse enacted against friends, neighbors, and animals. Some respondents were aware of multiple situations of IPV and animal maltreatment. Examples of individuals who perpetrated violence against their family members and their animals, including individuals who threatened or harmed animals as means of controlling their partners, were provided by respondents.

"My neighbor would harm their animals to enforce his threats against his partner and the children. He even went so far as to kill the children's kitten and made them leave it on the kitchen floor for a few days; it was traumatizing for the whole family."

"Abusive partner kicked the cats when he was mad at her."

"I also had a friend . . . whose partner killed her cats."

"As a child, I had a friend whose family was experiencing a number of different forms of violence and abuse. One story that has stuck with me for my life since I heard it was the way

my friend talked about her older brother and his partner. According to her, one day they were fighting, and he took the cat and put it in a pillowcase, and beat it with a baseball bat. The whole time my friend was watching. I think in this case, the abuse of the animal was a way to assert dominance but also was used as leverage because he knew the cat was beloved by the whole family. This also supports the idea that when humans are at risk, so are animals.”

“Father often beat the mother. Oldest kids stayed in the house to protect mother and younger kids came to our house for refuge. Dog was regularly beaten by the father at these and other times.”

“I was raised in a home with domestic violence. The abuser threw our family dog over a fence, resulting in the dog’s hind legs being broken. The abuser also abandoned our cat and we never saw the cat again.”

“A relationship I know of had mostly verbal, including threats, but also occasionally has had pushing/shoving/hitting during especially heated fights. I know the male in the relationship also gets very angry at the dogs and has been physically aggressive, including throwing/kicking/hitting/pulling fur.”

“My friend’s boyfriend would frequently use their pets, a puppy and a cat, as a method to keeping her. He would harm both if she made any effort to leave.”

“Threats against a family dog’s life were made if the individual left the relationship.”

“I know people where their dogs have been shot maliciously to control the wife from leaving.”

Participants shared examples of maltreatment of livestock and large animals, as well as companion animals.

“On our farm, large and small animals (pets and livestock) were often badly hurt. They were also used to control assets as most of the money was tied up in livestock (I am speaking as an adult child exposed to violence). As violence escalated, the level of injury to animals also increased.”

“Their livelihood was invested in their livestock, and the livestock were at risk of harm by the partner if this woman left the relationship. Not only would she be devastated by the cruelty that might be done to the animals, she would have no means of support for herself and her children.”

“I have also spoken to a woman (who I don’t know well, more of an acquaintance) who believed her abuser would harm her horses. . . She did say that fear kept her in the relationship longer. . .”

“Whenever the husband would get mad, he would go out to the animals and just be mean for no reason.”

“Often the victim doesn’t want to leave the animals, even large farm animals for fear they won’t be cared for.”

The impact on children who are exposed to IPV and animal maltreatment was noted by survey respondents.

“I have witnessed children that I babysit thinking it is alright to slap their dog because their parent does it, and teaches the child that violence is an appropriate form of discipline.”

Challenges can arise when animals are owned by a couple or when there is difficulty proving ownership. For people who jointly own livestock with their partner, leaving the relationship may mean leaving their financial livelihood. Victims/survivors experience barriers to leaving with companion animals when pets are owned jointly with their partner, the pet is owned by their partner, or the victim does not have proof of their own ownership of the pet.

“Partners will use the animal to hold their partner hostage. It is sometimes difficult to tell which partner has ‘rights’ to the animal.”

“Often ownership of the pet or livestock becomes an issue as the perpetrator of the violence will use the animals to control and harm the partner.”

“Farm animals are particularly at risk as abusers usually will not release the animals to be cared for by safe individuals.”

Barriers to Seeking Safety

Respondents shared examples of victims/survivors who delayed leaving because of concern for their animals and the need to plan for animals’ safety. Participants shared stories of individuals who had to surrender their pets to keep them safe. Individuals also had to give up their pets to seek safety for themselves, when they could not find accommodations with their pets. A lack of pet-friendly rental housing, including low-income/social housing, was noted by respondents.

“A friend fleeing a [domestic violence] DV situation not only thought of herself but her small dog when she left. . . her small dog was just as important [as] her safety.”

“My sister was able to bring her dog initially but then had to find a home for him when she couldn’t get a rental place. It was an additional trauma for her. Her husband had abused the pets if he was angry at them. One was a small kitten who he threw against the wall when it tried to play at night. It upset my sister so much that she gave the kitten to another family.”

“My mom was abused by my father. Abuse also went to my dog—anger led him to kick the dog many times. We decided to surrender him to the SPCA and gave my father the money to do so, but the money was spent on his gambling addiction and my dog was let loose in the city. To this day, I do not know what happened to my dog but I am hoping someone found him and he went to a better home.”

One respondent shared how, as a child, she did not want to be separated from the family dog and how this impacted her mother’s ability to plan for the family’s safety.

“We know much more now about the impact of children being exposed to intimate partner violence. We also better understand the human/animal bond. I remember how much threats to animals were used to control—to the extent that the one time my mother was leaving, I stalled (as a small child) because I couldn’t leave my dog. This was just enough time to upset the plan and her courage and she ended up staying. I don’t recall her ever trying to get us out of there again.”

Respondents also highlighted the responsibility that people have for their animals.

Victims/survivors who own both companion animals and livestock will often stay in situations that are unsafe for them rather than leave without their animals.

“The whole person, their life and all lives they support, must be considered when assisting someone who is experiencing intimate partner violence. If the individual is the main support for pets and livestock they will stay if safety is not available to both them and their pets and livestock.”

Animal Safekeeping in Situations of IPV

Several respondents had assisted with keeping companion animals temporarily for someone who was fleeing IPV. Some had cared for horses in situations of IPV, as well.

“Offered my home as a safe place for both friends and their animals leaving unsafe situations.”

“I have kept small dogs for friends as they exit relationships and either have unstable housing or are in places where animals aren’t allowed.”

“I have on occasion kept people’s companion animals while they relocate to another community and find housing that allows them to keep their animal companions. Sometimes this takes a couple months.”

“I have looked after many pets (dogs, cats, horses) while friends and friends of friends made plans to leave.”

Some respondents had not assisted with planning for temporary animal safekeeping, but stated that if they were aware of someone experiencing IPV and needing assistance with an animal, they would like to help.

“As a longtime companion pet owner, I understand that animals are in great danger during a time of separation as are IPV victims and their families. This is an issue that I am greatly interested in and hope to be able to participate and support in some way.”

Additionally, respondents stressed the need for safekeeping options for livestock. They noted challenges in providing this support, given the need for space and expertise to care for these animals.

“Finding adequate support/care for livestock was a significant issue. Companion animals, while still challenging, are much easier to find alternate care for than (many) large animals.”

“I know that re-homing livestock or large animals is quite difficult and I don’t think I can think of a solution unless there could be a staff position at the SPCA dedicated to caring for animals in emergencies.”

“Large animals such as horses are hard to place, as few facilities have the infrastructure and space to look after them.”

Respondents noted that pet safekeeping provided by local animal shelters or rescues is helpful for victims/survivors who are leaving IPV, though options for people to keep their companion animals with them are also needed.

Sheltering Survivors and Pets Together

Survey respondents recognized that being separated from their pets—permanently or temporarily—when leaving IPV can exacerbate the trauma that victims/survivors and their children experience. Respondents highlighted the need for pet-friendly domestic violence shelters and pet-friendly rental housing to allow families with pets to remain together after escaping IPV.

“I searched for a facility that provided shelter for a woman and her family pet, and was unable to find one. While I understand that the local SPCA might provide respite to family pets, this is not an option for many families as they would already be experiencing the trauma of separation and crisis. I am deeply troubled by this limitation.”

“The work with the Humane Society was helpful to give options to women leaving [IPV] for their pets’ care. However, a more ideal scenario would have been for them to bring their pet(s) to the shelter. Not having their animal(s) with them could leave women feeling more stress and anxiety, even if they were safe. Maintaining the connection with their animal(s) can provide comfort and assurance to the woman.”

“. . . often the pets are the victim’s best friend/confidante. This is especially difficult for seniors who need to flee an abusive situation and for children who need to flee with their mothers.”

“I really hope that shelters can be enabled to welcome families and their family pets in order to reduce the risk of families staying in the abusive situation out of concern and safety for the pet, and/or to allow for continued support through an exceptionally stressful time.”

“I believe that for an individual that is experiencing domestic violence and is ready to leave, they need to know that they can also bring their pet. So we need more housing and shelters willing to accept pets.”

“My sister could only afford a basement apartment and they had a firm no pet policy. It was traumatic for her son too to lose his pet as well as his home life.”

One respondent highlighted the need for legislative change to allow pet-owners to access rental accommodations:

“Saskatchewan needs legislation that prevents landlords from excluding pets from rental accommodations. I have personally had the experience of trying to find a rental apartment in Regina with a small dog. It was incredibly difficult and I ended up having to get help

in buying a condo because there were no pet-friendly rentals available. Regina rentals are closed off to people with pets. In contrast, Ontario has legislation that prevents landlords from implementing a 'no pets' policy. Saskatchewan has no such legislation. I absolutely agree that we must have options for women escaping violent situations (e.g., pet-friendly shelters; foster arrangements), but what happens after women leave the shelter? Saskatchewan needs to work on its policies pertaining to pets in rental units."

Respondents who own pets empathized with other pet owners, imagining what they might do to protect their own animals if they experienced IPV.

"Have not had any experience with intimate partner violence but if I did, I would want my pets safe and more often than not, a woman would have to go to a shelter where they do not keep animals. There has to be foster homes/shelters provided for animals that need to be temporarily housed when women escape a toxic situation."

"My pets are like family to me, and their care and safety is one of my top priorities. I am fortunate to be in a healthy, nonviolent relationship, but can absolutely say that my actions were I to experience IPV would be deeply informed by my animals. . ."

Respondents highlighted that rural areas of the province (small towns, First Nations, and northern communities without road access) do not have the same access to services—including domestic violence shelters and services and animal safekeeping programs—as in urban areas. Challenges accessing transportation for people and animals to leave rural and northern areas for safety, when needed, were also mentioned.

Some respondents noted organizations in Saskatchewan that assist with animal safekeeping for victims/survivors of IPV. One respondent has also mentioned a domestic violence shelter that has allowed residents to bring their pets into the shelter with them. Some participants cited promising practices in other jurisdictions, such as pet-friendly domestic violence shelters. Several respondents expressed the desire to learn more about available supports for animal safekeeping in situations of IPV.

Awareness of the Link

Several respondents shared that while they did not have any direct experience with IPV and/or animal maltreatment, they recognized the importance of the link and the need for resources for pet and livestock owners experiencing abuse. While many participants were aware of situations that their friends or family members went through and had the opportunity to provide support, it is common for victims/survivors not to disclose IPV when it is occurring.

“I don’t have any direct experience. With the friends I know about most of the time, I learned more about the abuse after the fact and when they were finally safe and/or divorced.”

Some respondents indicated that they had just become aware of the link and noted that victims of IPV may not be aware of risk factors and may not recognize the danger to themselves, their children, and their animals.

Respondents expressed appreciation for the present research and stressed the need for research to inform solutions applicable to Saskatchewan’s unique context, including rural and remote populations and victims/survivors of IPV who live on farms and own large animals and livestock. For some respondents, participating in the survey caused them to reflect on the link between IPV and animal abuse, illustrating that community-based research can be a vehicle for increasing awareness during the data collection phase as well as after completion of the research.

“I am glad to have participated in this unusual survey. Had me thinking about how abuse can occur at all levels of life.”

“I never considered the association before and yet I do see the connection often so feel this is important work.”

“This is a new topic for me. I wish I had more information [to] be more aware of it.”

Discussion

Extant research on the link between IPV and animal abuse and the need for animal safekeeping in situations of IPV has primarily included samples of survivors who stayed at domestic violence shelters and animal welfare and human service professionals. The present survey provides insight into awareness of and experience with the link among a community sample. Respondents included members of the public who had been exposed to IPV as children, people who had been aware of situations of concurrent IPV and animal abuse experienced by their friends and neighbors, and community members who did not identify experience with the link.

Many respondents stated that they had known someone who experienced IPV where their animals were also abused, neglected, or maltreated; several respondents knew more than one person who experienced IPV and abuse of their animals. Respondents provided examples of abuse of pets and livestock in the context of IPV and the impact IPV and animal maltreatment on adult and child victims/survivors. Respondents shared challenges associated with animal ownership. For example, for people who own livestock, leaving their relationship may mean leaving their financial livelihood and could lead to neglect of animals. The situation becomes more complex when victims own animals jointly with their abuser or have difficulty proving ownership of animals.

While not all survivors who own animals experience their animals being mistreated, care and responsibility for animals can be barriers to leaving relationships and accessing safety. Many victims/survivors delay leaving because of concern for animals. For people who own pets, the lack of pet-friendly housing is a barrier to leaving relationships where IPV is occurring. Safekeeping for livestock poses greater challenges, given the need for space and expertise to care

for these animals. Challenges differ depending on the number and type of livestock. Few respondents felt there were adequate supports in their local area to help someone with animals to leave a relationship when experiencing IPV. Access to domestic violence shelters, animal shelter/safekeeping, and transportation out of the community (for people and animals) is not consistently available across the province and is limited in rural, northern, and First Nations communities.

Findings from the present study add to the body of knowledge on the link generally, specifically adding to our understanding of the ways in which “natural supports,” including family and friends, assist with animal safekeeping in situations of IPV. Several respondents had assisted with keeping companion animals temporarily for someone who was leaving a relationship where they had experienced IPV. Some had cared for survivors’ horses, as well. Others stated that if they were aware of someone who was experiencing IPV and needed assistance with an animal, they would like to help. Results of a survey conducted with victims/survivors (Giesbrecht, 2021b) at the same time as the present study indicated that many survivors who own animals did not access formal supports but received assistance from family and friends. When survivors need temporary safekeeping for pets or care for livestock while they stay in a domestic violence shelter or work on securing housing and relocating for safety, many trust family and friends to care for their animals. This also ensures that they can see their animals when they want and collect their animals when they are ready. Caution is necessary when caring for animals in situations of IPV, however. When a friend, neighbor, family member, or volunteer takes pets into their home or attends a rural property to feed and water livestock, they could be at risk from a perpetrator of IPV. Collaboration between law enforcement, animal welfare professionals, and IPV professionals is necessary for assessing risk and providing support for

safety planning and risk management. Further, friends, family, and other community members often provide the first opportunity for support and information for survivors of IPV. Increasing public awareness of the link, warning signs and risk factors for IPV, and available services for IPV and animal welfare and safekeeping will help to ensure that natural supports recognize IPV and the link and victims/survivors receive a supportive response when they reach out.

Participants were clear that being separated from pets—temporarily or permanently—when escaping IPV can exacerbate the trauma that victims/survivors and their children experience. Respondents shared that animal safekeeping provided by local animal shelters or rescues is needed, though options for families leaving IPV to keep their companion animals with them are also necessary. Survey respondents provided recommendations, including the need for pet-friendly domestic violence shelters and pet-friendly rental housing. Respondents noted that most low-income social housing in the province does not allow pets, nor do many private rentals. Participants were clear that rental options for people with pets are necessary, and one respondent highlighted the need for legislative change, suggesting provincial legislation in line with that of Ontario’s *Residential Tenancies Act* (S.O. 2006, c. 17; Government of Ontario, 2020) which prevents landlords from having “no pet” policies.

Conclusion

Findings from this public survey echo the results of surveys conducted with survivors and service providers, which call for pet-friendly domestic violence shelters and pet-friendly rental housing. While the current study adds to the small body of extant research on experiences of IPV and livestock ownership, more work is needed to find practical solutions.

Findings from the present study indicate the importance of natural supports, including family, friends, and neighbors, for providing information, support, and assistance with animal

safekeeping in situations of IPV. Natural supports are especially important in rural and northern communities that do not have domestic violence and animal welfare agencies nearby. Public education on the link, available services and supports, and recognizing and responding to IPV is necessary. Collaboration between police, animal welfare professionals, and IPV professionals is essential for assessing risk and providing support for safety planning and risk management to ensure that community members who assist with animals are supported and safe.

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