

ANIMAL CRUELTY and HUMAN VIOLENCE

article by RANDALL LOCKWOOD

Randall Lockwood has a degree in biology, and a doctorate in psychology from Washington University. Eighteen years ago he joined the Humane Society of the United States, and has been with them since. He is currently Vice President for Research and Educational Outreach and works to increase awareness of the connection between animal abuse and other forms of violence. Randall talks here about how this awareness is growing globally.

Nearly twenty years ago I sat in the offices of the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services interviewing a perky seven year-old boy. I knew little about his family or its problems, my task was simply to find out about the animals in their lives and how they were treated. As a way of focusing our discussion, I showed him a simple drawing of a common scenario — it depicted a boy and a dog playing ball inside the house. A broken lamp was overturned on the floor. I asked him to tell me what would happen next in this story. He grew still and sullen and shook his head slowly. ‘That's it,’ he said in a matter-of- fact tone, “they're all going to die” Although he himself was not a victim of abuse, a sibling had been the target of physical assaults by his father, who was reportedly responsible for the disappearance of several family companion animals.

In another discussion with a six— year-old girl, the child became agitated at one drawing of a dog sleeping on the bed. She interpreted a shadow on the drawing as “poo-poo” and was concerned about the consequences of someone having made a mess. I later learned that her younger brother had been seriously scalded as punishment for soiling his pants and that the family dog had frequently been severely beaten for lapses of house-training. The child— protection workers assigned to the family had been unaware of the triggers for the abuse of the child, or of the long history of abuse of the dog.

Animals play a central role in the lives of children, both in fantasy and reality. They are central to their dreams, their fantasies, their play, and their daily lives. More than three-fourths of American families with school age children have companion animals. Yet, for many years, child-protection professionals tended to view the treatment or mistreatment of animals in families as irrelevant when trying to recognise or understand patterns of abuse. The special relationship between children and animals was often completely ignored.

In recent years it has become widely accepted that the mistreatment of animals can be an indicator of many other forms of family violence and ongoing abuse and neglect, including child abuse, elder abuse, domestic violence and mistreatment of the disabled. Cruelty to animals can also be a significant indicator that a child or young adult is at high risk of becoming a perpetrator of violence in society, perpetuating the cruelties that he or she has experienced. But we have also realised that the proper experiences with animals can provide a road back to empathy and compassion, and can be a powerful force for healing and a way of breaking the cycle of violence.

Soon after working on these early studies linking child abuse and animal abuse, I joined the staff of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). I was excited to find that, like myself, several staff members had been collecting information about case histories where animal cruelty had coexisted with other forms of violence. Others had documented many instances of notorious violent offenders who had early histories of repeated and severe acts of cruelty to animals. This was a connection that seemed obvious to most people in animal welfare. In fact, the connections

between animal cruelty and other violent behaviour seemed obvious to most of the general public. Surprisingly, however, only a handful of professionals had seriously pursued the issue or had written about it in the professional literature.

It was particularly disturbing that the professionals in the best position to make use of this information, those in law enforcement and mental health, seemed to be the least interested in the evidence. Early in my career with the HSUS, I was asked to respond to the concern of many of our supporters in local humane societies and animal care and control agencies that serious animal cruelty cases were being ignored. All too often serious instances of abuse were being dismissed by local police because the victim was “only an animal”, or because the maximum penalties for even the most horrendous abuse were little more than a slap on the wrist. The mental health community also tended to dismiss such cases with “boys will be boys”. The leading guide to defining abnormal behaviour — the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)” of the American Psychiatric Association made no mention of animal cruelty as being symptomatic of any disorder.

In 1986 we prepared an article entitled “The Tangled Web of Animal Abuse” for the Humane Society News, highlighting the existing research showing the interconnections between violence against people and animals. It was designed to give animal advocates a simple tool to help persuade local officials to take animal cruelty cases more seriously. It was enthusiastically received and more than 20,000 reprints were ordered by local humane groups over the next few years. In 1989, at the request of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, we prepared an updated version (revised in 2001) for distribution to tens of thousands of police officials around the globe. The HSUS also began to offer regular workshops to coordinate the formation of coalitions against violence that bring together the resources of professionals in animal protection, veterinary medicine, child protection, adult protective services, domestic violence prevention, law-enforcement, mental health and other fields.

Ironically, efforts to build community-wide responses to violence, including animal cruelty, represent a return to the practices of the early days of the humane movement. I have had an opportunity to go through the files of many of America's oldest humane societies, many dating back to the late 1800's. I am often impressed by the reports of a typical week in the life of a humane agent or cruelty investigator of this era. In the course of a few days such an agent might lecture young boys for throwing stones at a bird, charge a tradesman for overworking his horse, track down a runaway child, respond to a domestic argument, capture a stray dog, take food to an ailing elderly person and track down a deadbeat father who owed child support.

Over the years, society's response to violence became very fragmented, often being distributed across many different agencies focusing on a single victim or deed. Child abuse was handled exclusively by Child Protective Services. Spouse abuse was dealt with by women's shelters, police or victim advocate groups. Elder abuse was the responsibility of Adult Protective Services. Juvenile offenders were handled by a separate juvenile justice system whose records and proceedings were usually sealed due to the age of the offenders. Perpetrators with substance abuse histories were handled by one system, those with recognised mental health problems were often channeled into another. Fortunately, we seem to be returning to the realisation that the response to violence must involve many agencies in a community working together, and that cruelty to animals is a significant part of the web of violence that must be addressed.

Several factors have produced this change. First, there has been a steady growth in the scientific reports connecting animal cruelty to other forms of violence, which Frank Ascione and I

compiled in 1998 in *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence*. In addition, the mental health community has slowly recognised animal cruelty as a possible symptom of mental disorder. The OSM now classifies animal cruelty with “violence against others” as a sign of conduct disorder. Third, the HSUS, through its First Strike Campaign has actively reached out to law enforcement, mental health and social service organisations, and other animal protection organisation about these connections. Legislators and law enforcement agencies have seen the value of treating animal cruelty as a serious crime, often offering an opportunity for appropriate intervention at an early age or early stage in the development of violent patterns.

Those of us who love animals and include them in our families have always seen animal cruelty as family violence. Greater attention to the common role of the victimisation of animals in the context of other family violence is helping many professionals get a better grasp on the dynamics of abuse and neglect in these households, and provide responses that recognise the widespread, intergenerational web of violence that often afflicts these families. This attention is not limited to America. In May of 2001 we brought a First Strike presentations to New Zealand under the auspices of Unitec, the Animal Welfare Institute of New Zealand and the RNZSPCA. We have held similar meetings in Japan, Brazil, Costa Rica, England and Scotland. I am encouraged by the rapid growth in concern about animal cruelty, and efforts to create effective responses.

Empathy and compassion for all living things gives us an incredible gift, but it can also make those who care about animals even more vulnerable to the violence inflicted on the animals they care about by those who lack this gift. By recognising the special role of animals in the tangled web of family violence, people in many different fields and many nations will be better equipped to help foster a truly humane society.

Randall Lockwood efforts as spokesperson for the First Strike campaign were profiled in an award-winning 1999 British documentary entitled *The Cruelty Connection*. His book *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence*, co-edited with Dr Frank Ascione, was published in 1998. He is currently completing *Veterinary Forensic Investigation of Animal Cruelty* with Dr Leslie Sinclair. He lives in the suburbs of Washington, DC with his daughter Susan, his wife Julie, two cats, Simba and Nala, and a newt named Sunset.