Inside the Cruelty Connection:
The Role of Animals in Decision-Making
by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta

Research Report to the
Alberta SPCA

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First and foremost, it took the courage of those who were willing to contribute their very personal experiences. Although they cannot be named, we are grateful to the almost 300 women who responded to the survey and the 17 who participated in an in-depth interview. As one participant reasoned:

    The interview is a good thing, because if it helps other people, or helps keep pets safe, or saves another person, it would be worth it.

We hope it will indeed, be worth it.

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Executive Summary

Although the experiences of women living with domestic violence have been investigated through many qualitative and quantitative research studies, less is known about the effect of the presence of animals on their decision making. Women, with or without children, face numerous emotional, financial and logistical barriers to safely leaving an abusive situation. Previous anecdotal evidence indicated that concerns about the fate of companion animals or livestock could be an additional barrier to making the decision to leave. Given the high prevalence of animal ownership in Alberta, as well as the high rate of reported domestic violence, studying the relationships between these two factors and women’s ability to leave an abusive situation seemed relevant. Hence, the study that follows was commissioned by the Alberta SPCA in June of 2010, to help guide their initiatives in this area.

The project had as its specific goals investigating the following questions, with a particular focus on the rural environment:

- Are there impacts on the decision making of domestic violence victims in Alberta which are created specifically through their ownership of companion animals or livestock?
- Are children also impacted, and in what ways?
- What might be the implications, if any, for the organization and others of the findings of the study?

The study had both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Questionnaire responses from 296 women residing in five rural/suburban Alberta women’s shelters during the period from December, 2010 through to July, 2011 provided the quantitative data. Women who agreed to participate first answered basic demographic questions. If they had companion animals or livestock, they were asked further questions regarding the specifics of their situation with regard to those animals. Their responses were analyzed through a cascade of ever-narrowing filters, including the presence or absence of children in the home, and the presence or absence of threat or actual harm to the animals.

The second part of the study consisted of qualitative interviews with a variety of participants who could inform the research by having lived through such a situation personally, or by providing service to those women who have. 14 women who left domestic violence and had animals at the time, three now-adult children of such women, and 20 different service providers all provided data. This data was analyzed and coded into a variety of themes, and then compared to and combined with the quantitative data where relevant.

The quantitative and qualitative data does not in any way represent the beliefs and experiences of all rural women who attempt to escape domestic violence with animals as part of their many considerations. However, there is sufficient consistency in the voices of the study participants, and those of the service providers, to provide preliminary answers to the questions posed by the study.

In response to the first question above, the results of this study imply that decision making regarding leaving an abusive situation was negatively impacted by the presence of companion animals, and
perhaps to an even greater degree, by the ownership of livestock. Some exceptions to this finding might be made for aboriginal women, who have a much lesser degree of individual animal ownership than the general population, and for refugee/immigrant women who appeared so seldom at the participating women’s shelters that no conclusions can be drawn about them as a sub-group.

Of those women who had animals and responded to the relevant questions, 35.82% had animals that were subject to threats or actual harm. 79.16% of respondents whose animals were threatened believed it was possible that the threats could be carried out. Of the 48 respondents whose animals had experienced threats or harm, 41 (85.4%) indicated actual acts of harm had occurred. 39.39% of women whose animals had been subject to threats or harm knew their animals remained in unsafe conditions upon leaving, but left anyway for personal safety and other reasons. Of those who responded to the question, a clear majority of 58.87% delayed leaving, representing a mixed group of those whose animals were threatened or harmed, and those who simply had responsibility for the animals. Of the 31 respondents who had animals that had actually been threatened or harmed and answered the question, 74.19% delayed leaving, a significant number for that specific group.

It was evident from the qualitative interviews that the presence of companion animals and livestock was of great importance in the lives of women and their children. Control through the animals as a form of abuse and a means of preventing women and their children from leaving was so frequently noted that it was coded and themed separately. The victims interviewed made it very clear that, for women with animals they wished to protect by bringing them with as they left, solutions and assistance were not easy to find. The participants as a whole believed that many rural or farm women, especially those with livestock, were so affected by their circumstances that they simply did not, or could not, leave. This belief was true of respondents whether or not this was their personal experience.

Responses to this first research questions from service providers were similar to those of the victims themselves. They believed animals were viewed by the women as part of the family. Women did not want to leave without them and they would put themselves at risk by either staying when it was unsafe to do so, or going back to get their animals when it was also unsafe. In general, service providers believed at least some client decision making was impacted by fear and anxiety about their animals; fear of leaving them, and fear of taking them with. Women were often seen to be in a forced-choice situation, having to choose among their own safety, the best interests of their children, and the future of their animals.

In response to the second question above, it seems clear that children are impacted by the same situations as their mothers. These effects are negative, and appear to be both long and short term in nature. 55.74% of women in the women’s shelters were accompanied by children and 25.33% also had animals prior to leaving the abusive situation. Potentially, one quarter of children at the women’s shelters had been affected, at minimum, by separation from and anxiety about their animals.

Although most women reported trying to shield their children from both human and animal violence, they also reported a wide variety of effects on their children from witnessing. It is likely this represents an under-reporting of what children really observed or felt, as some things likely remain unknown to, or
denied by, the adult interviewees. A variety of social/emotional symptoms were observed in the children including fear, anxiety, sadness and loss of control. Interviewees whose children were now old enough to be in their own relationships believed that such relationships were being affected negatively by past experiences with both human and animal violence. For the three child witnesses who were interviewed as adults, encountering animal and human violence as children meant they suffered both short and long-term personal repercussions as a result.

Every service provider expressed the belief that witnessing human and animal abuse as a child was devastating for the child on many levels. Effects included but were not limited to: worrying about the care and safety of animals left with the abuser; missing the animals’ emotional companionship; feeling guilty about not saving them; and fear of never seeing them again.

Data received in response to the third question resulted in two implications. First, there is a role to be played by humane societies in addressing the findings of the study. Second is the corollary; given the interconnected nature of the issues surrounding human and animal abuse, no one agency can possibly do the necessary work on their own, nor would it be advantageous to try. Medical, veterinary, social service/mental health, government, education, justice and policing agencies, to list but a few, would need to be part of any workable solution through the formation of multi-disciplinary, community based partnerships.

The list of possible inter-agency links provided by both interviewees and professionals was extremely broad and inclusive. The following are the top 10 most often identified needs:

- Professional training regarding the links between human and animal cruelty for all those likely to come in contact with adults, children or animals that have been abused.
- Cross-training and cross-referral policies between animal, human and judicial/enforcement professionals. Each profession would need to make clear what the restrictions and prohibitions are for their work and engage collaboratively to remove unnecessary barriers to working together.
- Inquiry by all professionals, where it would be relevant, as to whether a presenting abused adult or child has animals, whether those animals have been threatened or harmed, and if they are attempting to leave, whether concern for the animals cause them additional anxiety.
- Including arrangements for animals in all safety or outcomes planning for domestic violence victims attempting to leave abusive relationships, wherever possible.
- Partnerships between human service and animal service organizations to assist in finding solutions to the animal placement problem for domestic violence victims who are trying to leave or recover from abusive situations.
- Legislative, policing and judicial changes to enable long term improvements for domestic violence victims and their animals in abusive situations. Such changes would need to be backed by political will.
- Specific and focused assistance plans for domestic violence victims from rural and farm environments, which are different and perhaps more difficult to leave than urban or metropolitan environments.
School and educator involvement as partners in pro-active education and reporting of possible abuse of children, adults or animals, given their access to children on a daily basis.

Addressing victims’ lack of knowledge about the nature of abuse and the resources available through a cooperative multi-agency focus.

Assistance for domestic violence victims leaving abusive situations in finding housing that will take animals.

In summary, the results of this study indicate that much could and should be done to assist women and children needing to leave an abusive situation while simultaneously caring for and about their animals. Realistically, little is likely to happen that has a major and lasting impact unless it is facilitated through a multi-faceted, multi-organization approach. Were such efforts supported by political will and resources, as they are in some provinces, chances of success would be even higher. Humane societies generally, and the Alberta SPCA in particular, are well positioned to begin laying the foundations for such work in Alberta.