Section 2. Quantitative Research Findings

The findings presented in this chapter are based on questionnaire responses from women who were admitted to five women’s shelters serving rural Alberta over a period of six months. The total number of questionnaires that were completed was 296. Some of the women’s shelters admit those in need of shelter who have no abuse in their backgrounds, and some such women may have completed the questionnaire in error. As reported by intake workers, they would be a very small minority.

Overall, these questionnaires offer comprehensive data that can be used for viewing the circumstances of women entering women’s emergency shelters from a number of perspectives, depending on the level of specificity of information required. The questionnaires have been structured and administered in such a way that subsets of the total sample population are clearly defined. Respondents indicate their membership in a particular subset by responding “YES” or “NO” – there is no ambiguity regarding the number of participants in any given subset.

With respect to the focus of this specific report, the questionnaire responses provide information about women entering five rural/suburban Alberta women’s shelters in relation to animal ownership, on three levels of specificity. On the level of “big picture”, the questionnaires provide information about the proportion of women who come to the shelters with children, as well as the proportion of women who own companion animals and/or livestock. The subset of Aboriginal women is also examined with regard to such animal ownership. On the second level of context, the responses provide information about subsets where women, with and without accompanying children, experience threats or harm to animals while living in abusive relationships or attempting to leave. On the most specific level of information, threats or harm to animals is described in terms of the effect it has on women and children, and documents their responses to the threats and harm.

Level 1: Overview of Respondents in Relation to Pet or Animal Ownership

The focal categories for this study were presence of animals and presence of dependent children. The questionnaire was designed to provide a picture of these major categories from various perspectives. This design also ensured that numbers within the categories could be cross-checked for accuracy. An additional category, which emerged because of their high rate of women’s shelter residency, was Aboriginal women. Depending on the reference source, the Aboriginal population of Alberta is between five and seven percent, with those numbers being higher in specific parts of Northern Alberta (Alberta Health Services, 2011) whereas almost 35% of questionnaire respondents self-identified as Aboriginal.

The big picture findings, given as percentages of the total number of responses, are summarized in the Figure 1 below.
**Question 1.5 Women with Children and Question 3.1 Women with Animals**

This diagram shows how the three most important subsets – animal owners, participants with accompanying children, and animal owners with children – were derived:

![Diagram showing the relationship between total participants, children, and animals.](image)

In summary, **45.27%** of responding women reporting having animals and **55.74%** presented with accompanying children. Women with children but no animals made up the largest sub-group (**30.42%**) followed by women with both children and animals (**25.33%**) who made up one quarter of the responding population.

**Question 1.1 Aboriginal Women Subset and Question 3.1 Women with Animals**

The data on Aboriginal women were of interest because this group of respondents present in relatively high numbers compared to their representation in the general population of Alberta. As will be seen further on in the data, they also represent a smaller percentage of animal owners than their numerical representation in the data. The data are presented below as subsets of the total number of respondents, to get a sense of the role of Aboriginal women in the overall demographic, as well as how the specific subsets are reflected within the Aboriginal subset.
Figure 2. Aboriginal Women Participants and Animal Ownership

Although statistics on Canadian and Albertan animal ownership are hard to come by, most references suggest that more than half of Canadian households own a pet (Perrin; 2009). Including livestock into the numbers, for which no statistics were readily available, may increase this percentage. Aboriginal households as represented by the respondents in this survey, declare significantly lower animal ownership (12.16%) than the survey group as a whole (45.27%) or the non-aboriginal group (33.11%), based on total participants (296). In total, of the 134 pet owning participants, (26.87%) were Aboriginal and (73.13%) were non-aboriginal. As becomes evident in the qualitative data, on-reserve animal ownership is often defined differently than in the overall population. Most on-reserve animals are described as being loosely owned rather than tied to an individual or family. Loose ownership is generally considered to include care such as “irregular feeding of a dog that roams freely” (International Companion Animal Management Coalition, p.5).

Question 3.2 Animal Ownership

The 134 animal owning respondents to this questionnaire collectively reported ownership of 188 animals, with dogs (77 or 41%) and cats (72 or 38.3%) representing the vast majority. Cattle (3), horses (5) and a donkey were the only livestock listed. Everything from lizards to fish was reported as animals, with 31 such other animals listed.

Of the 134 animal-owning participants, 77 (57.46 %) reported that the animals had names, while 58 (43.28%) reported that their animals were not named. The woman was responsible for animal care in 60 (44.77%) of cases, the children in 18 (13.43%) cases. Males (17), both partners (34) or both partners and children (10) were responsible in the other 45.51% of cases. In at least some of those joint care or male primary-care households, it might be fair to postulate that that the animals would be less likely to be subject to abuse if the abuser was part of the care, but this was not determined based on the survey data. Other family members held the final 6.71% of the animal care responsibility.
The total number of responses – 148 – includes some duplications, such as when “both partners”, and “both partners and children” were listed as caregivers for different animals in the same family.

**Level 2: Analysis of Harm in Animal Related Contexts**

In this second level of analysis, the responses provide information about subsets where women alone, or women with children, experienced threat or harm to animals while in abusive relationships.

**Question 3.3 Has Your Current Partner Ever Threatened to Harm or Actually Harmed the Pets or Livestock?**

This question is first reported in terms of the big picture – the 134 animal owning participants and with or without children.

**Figure 3. Threat/Harm to Animals and Presence of Children in Relation to Animal-Owning Participants**

In four cases where the response was “no threat or harm”, the respondent went on to describe events that could more generally be considered abusive: refusal to provide finances for animal food, threat to take animals to a humane society, refusal to provide vet care, and throwing the animal. These are recorded as “no” responses, as that is what was indicated on the questionnaire by the participant. If they were added, yes responses would be 52 (38.8%) and no would be 81 (60%). This is but one of example of women’s lack of knowledge regarding the nature of abuse; animal and human. Among those women who had animals, 48 or 35.82% were subject to threats or actual harm in relation to their animals. Of those who had animals that were threatened or harmed, 26 or 54.1% also had children.
**Question 3.4 (Part 1) What Did Your Partner Threaten to Do?**

Of the 48 respondents who indicated the presence of threats or harm to animals, the following 28 different actions were listed by people who commented on how animals were being threatened.

- Threats of Physical Harm: 6 (12.5%)
- Threats of get rid of 8 (16.66%)
- Threat to Kill: 10 (20.83%)
- Unspecified Threats 4 (8.3%)

In the majority of reports, more than one threat of physical harm was mentioned. Each response was only counted once in a category, no matter how many threats were listed. For example, a not atypical threat of physical harm list (count of 1) was: “throw it out the window, leave it outside to freeze, and lock it in the basement without water.”

Threats to kill tended to be reported as more general; “I’m going to kill that little f*****.” Getting “rid of” usually referred to taking an animal to a humane society, giving it away or abandoning it.

Some respondents reported both threats and actual harm, in which case both were recorded once. An example would be: “kill them, threatened; kicked them, actually did.” In this case, killing was reported as a threat in the data, and kicking as actual physical harm, which appears in 3.4 Part 2.

**Question 3.5 If There Was a Threat, Do You Think Your Partner Might Have Followed Through?**

The 48 respondents to this question reported the following perceptions:

- Yes 30 (62.5%)
- No 10 (20.83%)
- Unsure 8 (16.66%)

The majority of respondents, 79.16% (38), believed there was at least a possibility the threats could be carried out.

**Question 3.4 (Part 2) What Harm Did Your Partner Actually Do?**

Some respondents provided different answers for different animals, for a total of 51 responses. Of the 48 respondents, 41 (85.4%) respondents indicated actual acts of harm, of which 31 acts (64.58) appear not to have been preceded by a threat. In some cases, this was hard to determine, and subject to the interpretation of the intake worker recording the data, and the researcher interpreting the qualitative responses that were written in.
31 of the 51 actions reported involved physical harm done to the animals. In most cases, more than one event was listed. The longest list included: “hits dogs in the face; kicked the dogs very hard, so they went flying; hit them hard on the hips; thrown outside, face smashed into the ground for digging; face rubbed in feces then smacked in the face.” In some cases, it was difficult to tell if physical harm caused death or not: “he shot my cat”. Unless death was specified, such responses were recorded as physical harm only.

Eight reports indicated that the partner “got rid of the animals.” It was impossible in six cases to tell if that meant gave them away, killed them, or removed them from the home. Two deaths could actually be confirmed. Ambiguous responses are typified by: “son’s father said the dog ran away, but the landlord overheard what happened and the dog ended up in the garbage bag dead.” One death report indicated: “Partner would kill the puppies and kittens. Threatened and followed through with breaking their necks. He sold her last batch of puppies and shot her dog before she left.”

Another eight reports indicated isolation or neglect of the animal, such as locking it outside in freezing weather, refusing to pay for food or refusing veterinary care. In four cases the respondents were not sure what happened – whether an animal was killed, died of natural causes or ran away, but it was no longer present and they strongly suspected the partner.

It must also be remembered that each of the participants is reporting from a women’s shelter, and in almost all cases, has been subjected to personal violence, along with witnessing violence towards their animals. Although the two do not always co-exist, there is certainly dual occurrence in at least these 48 instances.

Level 3: Analysis of Effects of Harm or Threat of Harm to Animals

In this most detailed level of analysis, the effects of potential or actual harm to animals are discussed in terms of impact on child witnesses and the impact on women’s decisions regarding leaving the abusive situation. Since only women for whom the sub-questions were relevant responded, each response is described in relation to the total number of women in the subset who answered the particular question.
Questions 3.6 and 3.7 and Questions 3.3 and 3.4 Threat/Harm

Figure 4. Role of Threat/Harm for Animal-Owning Participants

Of the 134 women with animals, 48 (35.82%) had those animals threatened or harmed. 41 (85.4%) of the 48 observed actual harm with or without a threat first. 31 (64.5%) respondents reported just harm, with no preceding threat, 7 (14.5%) reported threats but no harm, and 10 (20.8%) reported threats followed by or in combination with harm.

Of the 26 respondents with children, 22 (84.6%) believed that the children saw or heard the threats, 16 (61.53%) further believed that their children witnessed or were aware of the actual harm done to the animals. For 13 (50%) of these child witnesses, it is reported by the mother that the child’s own animal was threatened or harmed. Occasionally threats were not only overheard by children, but involved them directly: “He told my then four year old if she did not clean up puppy’s mess, he would slit its throat.”

Given that some of the children were babies or infants and therefore not reportable in this context, the percentage of actual children affected within this reported category is extremely high.
Question 4.0 Has Your Partner Discussed Animal Abuse Previous to the Relationship?

51 participants found this question to be relevant to their circumstances. Of these, 9 (17.65%) reported Yes to past animal abuse by their partner while 42 (82.35%) reported No.

From the group of 48 where threats or harm occurred, 40 participants responded to this question, with 8 saying Yes (20%), and 32 (80%) saying No. In general, this is lower than rates reported in other studies, for reasons that are not discernible.

Question 3.9 Have You Ever Discussed the Threat or Harm to the Animals with Your Children?

Of those 26 respondents who had children and whose animals had been threatened or harmed, 18 had then discussed this with their children. Of the 8 who said no, 6 of the children were pre-school age, and might have been judged by the parent as too young for such discussion.

Question 5.0 Have You Ever Been Afraid to Get Help or Tell Anybody About Your Situation Because You Were Worried about Your Pet or Livestock’s Safety or Well Being?

Figure 5. Afraid to Get Help: Animal-Owning Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Animal-Owning Participants</th>
<th>YES Afraid</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>NOT Afraid</th>
<th>Did Not Respond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>134</td>
<td>36 (26.87% of 134)</td>
<td>2 (1.5%)</td>
<td>64 (47.76%)</td>
<td>32 (23.88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(35.2% of 102 respondents)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(62.75% of 102 respondents)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In five cases, respondents who said “no” added “because everyone already knew” or words to that effect. In 3 other instances, women responded “no” because they took the animals with them at the same time they sought help. Surveys are always subject to the interpretation of the question by respondents, but this question was clearly subject to some contextual interpretations of the meaning. This may also explain why 102 of the total of 134 animal owners responded while 32 did not respond to this question. Of those who responded, 36 (35.2%) said Yes, they were afraid.
Question 5.2 Did You Stay in the Relationship Longer than You Would Have If There Were No Pets or Animals to Worry About? (39 respondents)

This question should have been responded to only by those 36 individuals who responded yes to the previous question, however, 39 responses were recorded. One of the first 36 did not answer any further questions, and four people who answered No continued on with questions although they had been directed to stop. In retrospect, all respondents who responded to question 5.0 should have been asked to respond through to question 5.7.

Yes – 23 (58.97%) of 39  
No – 8 (20.51%) of 39  
Unsure – 8 (20.51%) of 39

Of those who responded, a clear majority, 58.97% delayed leaving, representing a mixed group of those whose animals were threatened or harmed, and those who simply had responsibility for the animals.

Question 5.2.1 If Your Animals Had Been Harmed or Threatened, Did You Stay in the Relationship Longer than You Would Have If There Were No Pets or Animals to Worry About? (31 respondents)

Yes 23 (74.19%)  
No 8 (25.8%)  

31 respondents who had animals that had actually been threatened or harmed answered this question. 74.19% delayed leaving, a significant number for that specific group.

Question 5.3 Did You Look for a Safe Place for the Animals? (50 respondents)

Yes – 39 (78%) of 50  
No – 11 (22%) of 50 (one respondent actually had no animals)

Of those who responded, more than ¾ looked for a safe home for their animals.

Question 5.5 Did You Find a Safe Home for the Animals? (39 respondents)

Yes – 28 (71.79%) of 39  
No – 11 (28.21%) of 39

Not all respondents who found a safe home indicated where it was, and some respondents indicated different homes for different animals. Most prevalent as a response was placement with a relative (12) or a friend (7). Four noted surrendering to a humane society, with one commenting they were not told about a 21 day emergency boarding plan until it was too late. Four found homes for the animals with
neighbours. Creative solutions included asking people in the dog park, and placing a newspaper ad. Two people had some animals that were safe at home, because the partner liked them, while others they had to place. The variety of individual plans is exemplified by: “I found some of the puppies homes, one male and one pup went to the SPCA and I kept one. It was heartbreaking.”

**Question 5.6 NO, I Did Not Look for a Safe Home, What Was the Reason?**

One respondent of the 10 who replied in the negative gave no answer to this part of the question and some picked more than one choice. In four cases, they knew there was nothing available, three said they could not afford anything, two had no way to transport the animals and six chose “other”. No one was afraid they would be found out. No single reason for not looking was predominant.

**Question 5.7 When You Left Home, What Happened to the Animals? (51 respondents)**

Of the 51 people who responded to this question, some gave different answers for different animals. 20 animals stayed in their original home, 11 were somewhere safe, five came with the victim, and two were missing or dead. Of the 13 responses in the “other” category, 4 animals were at a humane society, one had been picked up by the pound, and all the others might have been assumed by the corresponding written answer to be safe, but were recorded by the respondents as other. This included having been adopted out, returned to previous owner, and similar responses.

33 of the respondents in this group were women whose pets had been threatened or harmed. Of this sub-set, five went with the woman, and seven were somewhere safe. Two were missing or dead, 11 remained in the abusive home, and eight were in the “other” category. At least 13 women of the 33, or **39.39%**, knew their animals were in unsafe conditions upon leaving. This is similar to the range found by Flynn (2009):

> Depending on the study, in anywhere from 4 to 50 percent of the cases, the animal was still with the abusive partner or ex-partner. This created much anxiety and concern among the women, who were not only worried about their animals’ well being, but who were vulnerable to the batterers’ attempts to control them by threatening to harm their companion animals. (p.117)

Table 1 compares the present study with other recent studies on the same topic. While our statistics generally agreed with previous studies, there are some noteworthy differences. The percentage of shelter population women who had animals was lowest in our study. It is possible that the rate of animal ownership was affected by the high number of Aboriginal clients reporting, but there are no comparative figures for this sub-group in other studies. Certainly, non-aboriginal animal ownership was about 3 times higher than Aboriginal, and higher than overall numbers in the other studies.
Table 1. Comparison with Other Studies

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants with animals</td>
<td>45.27% (N=134 of 296)</td>
<td>70% (N=191 of 273)</td>
<td>65% (N=65 of 100)</td>
<td>64.1% (N=65 of 101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal participants with animals</td>
<td>73.13% (N=98 of 134) or 50.52% of 194 Non-Aboriginals or 33.10% of 296</td>
<td>Not reported separately</td>
<td>Not reported separately</td>
<td>Not reported separately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal participants with animals</td>
<td>26.87% (N=36 of 134) or 35.94% of 102 Aboriginals or 12.16% of 296</td>
<td>Not reported separately</td>
<td>Not reported separately</td>
<td>Not reported separately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants with animals who also had children</td>
<td>55.97% (N=75 of 134) or 25.33% of 296</td>
<td>57% (N=109 of 191) or 39.9% of 273</td>
<td>47.7% (N=31 of 65) or 31% of 100</td>
<td>60% (N=39 of 65) or 38.61% of 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants with children and animals where the children were aware that an animal had been threatened with abuse or harmed</td>
<td>84.62% (N=22 of 26) or 29.33% of 75 or 16.42% of 134 or 7.43% of 296</td>
<td>33.94% (N=37 of 109) or 19.37% of 191 or 13.55% of 273</td>
<td>64.5% (N=20 of 31) or 30.77% of 65 or 20% of 100</td>
<td>61.5% (N=24 of 39) or 36.92% of 65 or 23.76% of 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants with animals whose partner threatened to harm animals</td>
<td>35.42% (N=17 of 48) or 12.69% of 134 or 12.16% of 296</td>
<td>45% (N=86 of 191) or 31.50% of 273</td>
<td>39.4% (N=26 of 65) or 26% of 100</td>
<td>80.8% (N=53 of 65) or 52% of 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants with animals whose partner had actually harmed animal</td>
<td>85.4% (N=41 of 48) or 30.59% of 134 or 13.85% of 296</td>
<td>41% (N=35 of 86) or 18.46% of 191 or 12.82% of 273</td>
<td>47% (N=31 of 65) or 31% of 100</td>
<td>83.08% (N=54 of 65) or 53.47% of 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants with animals who were more reluctant to disclose or get help</td>
<td>35.29% (N=36 of 102 who responded) or 26.87% of 134 or 12.16% of 296</td>
<td>60% (N=115 of 191) or 42.12% of 273</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>44.62% (N=29 of 65) or 28.71% of 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants with animals who delayed decision to come to a women’s shelter due to concern for their animal’s safety</td>
<td>58.97% (N=23 of 39 who responded) or 17.16% of 134</td>
<td>27% (N=52 of 191)</td>
<td>25.4% (N=16 of 63)</td>
<td>35.38% (N=23 of 65)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= number of respondents within a specific category or subset, OR number of people responding to the question, compared to the larger pet owner category or to the total number of respondents in the survey

Participants who had both animals and children are relatively similar in all four studies. For the most part, more than half the women with animals had children, and many of those children were exposed in some way to human and animal abuse. This study had the highest number in that category, (84.62%) and it is certainly an issue to be noted for those working with such children.
The respondents in our study indicated a lower frequency of threats to animals by their partners than the other studies, but a higher percentage of actual harm done. Much of the animal abuse appears to have occurred without prior warning. Without knowing exactly how the question was worded in other surveys, it is hard to do a comparison, but the actual harm rates reported are similar to that of Ascione and double that of the other two studies.

Women in this study reported lower levels of concern with regard to disclosing or getting help than in others. There were some qualitative comments to the effect that it did not matter; either everyone already knew, or there was nowhere to get help in their location anyway. Rather, their decision to delay leaving seems to have been most affected. Of those pet owners who did enter the shelters, 35.29% of the women who responded indicated that they were reluctant to report abuse or to seek help because of fear of what would be done to their pets, but 58.97% reported that they delayed leaving because of concerns for their pets. The latter number is significantly higher than other studies.

These numbers from all four studies are consistent in indicating some general trends:

- A significant number of women who enter women’s shelters have animals
- Those animals are often under threat along with the women themselves
- Children often witness the threats to the animals
- Women delay leaving and/or seeking help, as a result of concern for the animals

There is a clear linkage, in the three previous studies and this current one, between human and animal abuse, and the effects of both on women and their children.

Qualitative Comments from Questionnaire

Although the questionnaire’s purpose was to collect quantitative data from women’s shelter residents, some respondents did offer comments either by writing them personally, or as recorded by the intake worker.

Animal Placement

Those who had companion animals or livestock where there was no threat to the animals, and the animals had no effect on their decision making, reported various solutions regarding placement of the animals. Typical were the following comments:

- I didn’t think of it because it was a “res” (reserve) cat.
- Animal stayed in the family home while she came to the shelter. She feels this is safe. Dog is owned and cared for by all family members.
- Gave her lots of food (cat) and asked a neighbor to tend to her.

There were significantly more written comments, as would be expected, from women where the animals did impact decision making, and may have been under threat. Similarly, there were different
references in the comments to placements than were actually reported in the questionnaire. A respondent might leave the question blank, but then report in writing elsewhere as to the outcome for the animal. Animals were variously reported in the 29 written comments to be: at a humane society (6); dead (5); cared for by a friend (4); safe at home (2); with relatives (2); sold by the partner (2); adopted out (2) and one each of: at home and not safe; missing; boarded; adopted; given away by the partner; and given away by the victim. The numbers and places are different than for question 5.7 and may perhaps refer to different animals in the same family and certainly reflect the difference between those who answered the question only, commented only, and some who did both. All tables represent a question’s statistical answers, not comments.

Many of the comments were similar to those that follow in the qualitative interview section:

He took our two cats and just dropped them off somewhere without anyone knowing. The horse is still safe boarded out, my dad has the dog and grandma has the bird.

We gave each dog (two) away within six months and chose never to own any again.

I didn’t want to take him (cat) away from his home, so he is still there.

She had to give the cat to the shelter because she was afraid he would hurt the cat.

Importance of Animals

Five women commented generally on the importance of their animals, and of those, three referred to them like they were family members. Typical comments on the importance of the animals include:

My dog came out of the bedroom when he was freaking out at me. She came and stood beside me to protect me.

The dogs are the kids and mine, and I will get them back when the time is right.

I would have been gone long ago if not for the pets.

Abuse of Animals by Partner

Most often reported was that the animals were physically hurt. All of the general forms of abuse listed in the questionnaire comments are echoed by the women in the qualitative interviews that follow in the next chapter. 45 individual unsolicited comments about the nature of the animal abuse were offered, of which a representative sample include:

He threatened to kick the animals out of the house or send to the SPCA. He actually kicked them (dog and cat) against the wall.
Threatens to throw pets out the window, kill them, shoot them, or give them away. He would pretend to pet an animal and feed it, then throw it over a fence or lock it in a shed.

If you leave it here your dog will be dead

History of shooting birds with bb guns and chopped a rabbit’s head off with an axe previously.

**Leaving**

The presence of animals in the women’s life presented various complications as they attempted to leave the abusive situation. Most often identified (3 each) was housing and finding a way to safely go back and get the animals from the home after leaving without them.

Client was hurt so could not deal with kitten. When she was hurt, her first thought was the safety of her kitten.

Won’t give away pet, tried to stay in places that will accept pets, like a hotel, but it was expensive.

Four women offered that they would have left earlier, if not for the pets.

As McIntosh (2004) found:

The present study confirms prior research that indicates that animal abuse and other forms of family violence often co-exist, and that this often leads to women delaying the decision to seek shelter, for themselves, their children, and their animals, from this violence. (p. 15)

**Effects**

As might be expected, most of the statements regarding the effects specific to animal abuse centered on fear for both the human and animal victims. They ranged from worrying about leaving the house for an evening without the animal, to fear that the animal might be trained to hurt a future newborn child. That the effects are long lasting was also clear. An intake worker recorded that:

She still suffers the loss of her pet and said that she even continues to dream about her. Since she has come into the shelter, her main concern has been to get her kitten out of the house. We are currently trying to get it to safety.

As will be seen in the three chapters that follow, comments from the various qualitative interviews serve to mirror and enhance the findings from the quantitative survey.
Summary

Of the 296 people who filled out the questionnaire, 134, or 45.27% had animals. Almost all of the animal owners had companion animals, rather than livestock. 48 reported threats or actual harm to the animals and of those, 22 had children who were aware of the threats or harm. There are a number of ways to interpret these three pieces of data, but at least one possibility is that it may be more difficult, for a variety of reasons, for women whose animals are being abused to make it as far as intake at a women’s shelter. Similarly, having children and animals, may be a double issue. Certainly, it could be postulated that it is difficult for women with livestock (or livestock and children) to do so, and both topics are further explored in the qualitative interviews.

Although the low incidence of animal ownership (12.16%) among the Aboriginal clients at the women’s shelters was not a surprise based on other statistics, it did perhaps affect the results numerically, since their rate of residency was relatively high (34.46%). Other similar studies do not report this information separately.

While women with children and no animals made up the largest group of residents, 25.37% of those women who presented at the five women’s shelters had both children and animals as a responsibility and concern when leaving, above and beyond their personal needs. As noted by Onyskiw (2007),

Pets may be an especially important support for women without children... The stronger the emotional attachment to the pet, the more likely the pet was harmed. Women without children more frequently reported that their pets had been harmed than women with children. (p. 14)

Of the respondents who indicated there had been threats and harm to animals, 26 (86.66%) also had children. 22 (84.6%) believed the children saw or heard the threats, and, 16 (61.53%) believed the children were aware of the actual harm being done to the animals. It can be reasonably assumed that victims of violence are not totally aware of all that their children see and hear for a variety of reasons, so if anything, the above statistics may be an under-report. Although the actual numbers are not large, the reported percentage of children in this situation who overheard or actually witnessed abuse of the animals is very high.

Of the threats reported, killing was the most prevalent (20.83%). Most women believed the partner to be capable of carrying out his threats (62.5%) and a total of (79.16%) thought it was possible. However, it was much more common for the abuser to act, than to just threaten the animals. Of the 48 women, 7 (14.5%) reported threats only, 10 (20.8%) reported threats followed by harm and 31 (64.5%) reported one or more actual acts of harm with no preceding threat. In all, 41 (85.4%) reported actual harm. These numbers, of course, only reflect those women who actually got to a women’s shelter, and were able to gain admittance.

Of the 102 participants who responded to the question around fear of getting help, 36 (35.29%) said yes, they had been reluctant to seek help or report abuse. Of the 39 who responded to the question
regarding delayed leaving because of the animals, 58.9% said yes. The most affected group was women whose animals had been threatened or harmed, where 74.19% reported delaying leaving.

When asked where the animals were at time of leaving, 33 of the 51 respondents had animals which had been threatened or harmed. At least 13 women of the 33, or 39.39%, knew their animals were in unsafe conditions upon leaving, with some others giving answers that were too ambiguous to determine the response.

Actual harm to animals is higher in number than other studies, while threats are somewhat lower. It is possible that each of the studies calculated these numbers in a different way. For women where actual threats and harm occurred, rate of delayed leaving is much higher than other studies. And, none of these numbers represent the difficulties for abused women who also have livestock, or livestock and children, since in this study, they rarely made it to a women’s shelter.