

Factors in the Assessment of Dangerousness in Perpetrators of Animal Cruelty

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We are frequently called upon to assist cruelty investigators, law-enforcement officers, court officials or mental health professionals in evaluating the significance of an individual's involvement in a particular act of animal cruelty as an indicator of dangerousness or possible risk for involvement of future acts of violence against others. The relatively low level of attention given to even the most serious acts of animal abuse has made it difficult to systematically or quantitatively assess the various factors that should be considered in evaluating the potential significance of various violent acts against animals. However, the following factors are suggested as relevant criteria in such evaluations. They are based on several sources including:

1. Retrospective studies of acts of cruelty against animals reported by violent offenders
2. Studies and reports of acts of animal cruelty committed prior to or in association with child abuse and/or domestic violence
3. Extrapolation from criteria used in threat assessment by the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime
4. Extrapolation from numerous studies on general characteristics of habitual violent offenders

There is, as yet, no absolute scale that determines when a particular collection of factors reaches critical levels. It is suggested, conservatively, that more than five of these aggravating factors should be cause for serious concern, and that more than ten can indicate a high potential that the offender has been or will be involved in serious acts of violence against people.

1. Victim vulnerability

Acts of violence against victims that are particularly small, harmless or non-threatening by virtue of species, size, age, injury or disability are indicative of perpetrators particularly willing to gain a sense of power and control through violence against those least likely to retaliate, and thus should be considered at higher risk of aggression to children, the elderly, the disabled and other vulnerable victims.

2. Number of victims

The selection of multiple victims killed or injured in the same instance suggests a greater potential for uncontrolled violence.

3. Number of instances within a limited time frame

Several separate instances (e.g. attacks on animals at two or more locations) within a 24 hour period reflects a predatory style of attack that is suggestive of organized and premeditated violence against others.

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4. Severity of injury inflicted (on continuum from minor injury to death of victim)

5. Repetition of injuries on individual victim(s)

In general, perpetrators who have inflicted multiple blows, stab wounds, etc. on one or more victims should be considered a higher risk.

6. Multiple forms of injury to individual victim(s)

Perpetrators who inflict two or more forms of injury (e.g. burn and bludgeon) should be considered a higher risk

7. Intimacy of infliction of injury

Abuse that involves direct physical contact or restraint and obvious opportunity to witness the victims' response (e.g. beating, strangling, crushing, hanging, stabbing) may be a more serious indicator than actions that are more remote (e.g. shooting, poisoning, vehicular injury).

8. Victim(s) is bound or otherwise physically incapacitated

Abuse that includes binding, tying, securing with duct tape, confining in a box or bag or otherwise rendering the animal incapable of escape (e.g. crippling) is suggestive of a higher degree of intentional, premeditated violence.

9. Use of fire

A large body of criminological and psychological literature points out the connection between animal cruelty and arson as significant predictors of violent and even homicidal behavior. The combination of these factors, i.e. the intentional burning of a live animal should be considered particularly significant as an indicator of the potential for other violent acts.

10. Duration of abuse

Acts of prolonged maltreatment (e.g. torture) rather than sudden or instantaneous death are more indicative of potential for repeated violence against others

11. Degree of pre-planning or premeditation

Acts that were premeditated rather than reactive or opportunistic and which involved assembling tools or instruments of injury are more suggestive of high risk. Very long term planning (e.g. several days or weeks) suggests possibility of psychopathic thought processes as contributing factor.

12. Act involved overcoming obstacles to initiate or complete the abuse

Abuse that involves risk or effort (e.g. climbing barrier, breaking and entering, etc.) or pursuit of a victim that escapes initial attack, is indicative of highly motivated violent behavior and thus should be considered an indicator of greater risk for future violence.

13. Act was committed with high risk of detection or observation

Animal cruelty that is perpetrated in public or with high probability of detection should be considered indicative of low concern for consequences of the perpetrator's acts, and thus an indicator of risk for other violence.

14. Other illegal acts were committed at the scene of the animal cruelty

Personal and property crimes occurring in conjunction with the commission of animal cruelty, (e.g. vandalism, theft, threats to assault on owner or witness) should be considered indicative of higher risk for other violent and/or criminal acts.

15. Individual was the instigator of an act involving multiple perpetrators

Although the perpetration of many acts of violence may be more likely in a group setting, particular attention should be paid to instigators of such group violence against animals.

16. Animal cruelty was used to threaten, intimidate or coerce a human victim

Killing or injuring animals to exercise control or threats over others, especially those emotionally attached to those animals, should already be considered a form of emotional abuse and a behavior that, by definition, already involves violence against people.

17. Act of animal cruelty was indicative of hypersensitivity to real or perceived threats or slights.

Violent perpetrators often misread cues and intentions of others as indicative of threats, taunts, etc. Acts of violence against animals conducted with this motivation can be considered indicative of a high-risk response to social problems.

18. Absence of economic motive

While an economic motive (e.g. killing and stealing animal for food) does not excuse animal cruelty, the presence of an economic motive, in the absence of other aggravating factors, may suggest a mitigating factor that could decrease the assessment of risk for future violence. Conversely, the lack of such a motive suggests the act was rewarding to the perpetrator by itself.

19. Past history of positive interactions with victim

Instances of animal abuse in which the perpetrator has previously interacted positively or affectionately with the victim (e.g. acts against one's own pet) suggest an instability in relationships that can be predictive of other types of cyclic violence such as domestic abuse.

20. Animal victim was subjected to mutilation or postmortem dismemberment

Mutilation is usually associated with disorganized motives of power and control, which are often associated with interpersonal violence.

21. Animal victim was sexually assaulted or mutilated in genital areas or perpetrator indicated sexual arousal as a consequence of the abuse

The eroticization of violence should always be considered potential warning sign for more generalized violence. A past history of sexual arousal through violent dominance of animals has been characteristic of many serial rapists and sexual homicide perpetrators.

22. Act of cruelty was accompanied by indicators of sexual symbolism associated with the victim

Written or spoken comments indicating that the perpetrator viewed the animal as representative of a substitute human victim (e.g. "that pussy had to die", "the bitch deserved it") should constitute a serious warning sign of the potential for escalation of violence to a human target.

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23. Perpetrator projected human characteristics onto victim

If other evidence suggests perpetrator viewed the animal victim as a specific human individual or class of individuals, this may indicate that the violence could be a rehearsal for related acts against human victims.

24. Perpetrator documented the act of animal abuse through photographs, video or audio recording, or diary entries

The memorialization or documentation of cruelty indicates that acts of violence are a continuing source of pleasure for the perpetrator, a serious indicator that such violence is strongly rewarding and very likely to be repeated and/or escalated.

25. Perpetrator returned at least once to scene of the abuse, to relive the experience

As above, the continuation of the emotional arousal experienced during the perpetration of cruelty is an indicator of significant likelihood of reenactment, repetition or escalation of the violence to reach the same rewarding emotional state.

26. Perpetrator left messages or threats in association with the act of cruelty

Using violence against an animal as a form of threat or intimidation is often symptomatic of more generalized violence. The additional intimidation of written or verbal threats (e.g. notes left with an animal body or letters sent to someone who cared about the animal), are strongly indicative of potential for escalated violence.

27. Animal victim was posed or otherwise displayed

Positioning or displaying the body of a victim (e.g. on front steps, in mailbox), or wearing or displaying parts of the remains (e.g. skins, paws) can be indicative of the use of such violence to gain feelings of power, control and domination - or to alarm or intimidate others. This should be considered a serious warning sign of potential for escalated or repeated violence.

28. Animal cruelty was accompanied by ritualistic or “satanic” actions

Animal cruelty accompanied by “satanic” or ritualistic trappings suggests an effort to reject societal norms or attempts to seek power and control through magical thought processes, which may escalate to fascination with the application of such ritual to human victims.

29. Act of abuse involved staging or reenactment of themes from media or fantasy sources

The reenactment of cruelty to animals in ways the perpetrator has been exposed to through media or fantasy sources (including video games) can be indicative of weak reality testing and a greater likelihood of copying other media portrayals of violent acts against human victims.

30. Perpetrator reportedly experienced altered consciousness during the violent act

Acts that are accompanied by blackouts, blanking, de-realization or depersonalization should be considered indicative of thought disorders that could contribute to acts of violence against human victims.

31. Perpetrator reportedly experienced strong positive affective changes during the violent act

Violent or destructive acts that are reportedly accompanied by strong positive affect (laughter, descriptions of a “rush”, exclamations of generalized or sexual excitement) indicate that such violence is being strongly reinforced and is likely to be repeated and/or escalate.

32. Perpetrator lacks insight into cause or motivation of the animal abuse

Repeat violent offenders often display little or no insight into the motivation of their violent acts.

33. Perpetrator sees himself as the victim in this event and/or projects blame onto others including the animal victim

Repeat offenders and those resistant to intervention are less likely to take responsibility for their actions and often offer self-serving, fanciful or bizarre justifications for their actions.