

# Pets at home? Considering animal forensics in the domestic setting

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## Introduction

Traditionally, animal forensics involves the utilisation of animal-derived physical evidence to support or refute connections between people, places, animals and items. Such linkages can be critical and have proven invaluable in wildlife crime cases, where such analyses may be routinely requested by investigators (e.g. badger hair on ropes found in a vehicle, or dog DNA from bite marks on a hare carcass). In contrast, crimes against companion animals are rarely approached in this way, due in part to the legitimate access people have to their pets, or those of others. That is not to say that there are no evidential opportunities, but in either setting, animals should be considered beyond a source of material and as a complete body of evidence in their own right. Regardless of the context, animals can be witnesses, aggressors and victims, and by evaluating their presence (or absence) in an investigation (even those which are human-centric) significant information may be gained, and this approach is applicable to a range of legal investigations

The applicability of animal forensics is beyond the scope of this piece, but in short, there is vast potential. If the discipline or test of interest exists in the human realm, then it can most likely be applied to an animal case, but the ultimate potential can only be realised if a) the investigative team consider such possibilities in the first place, and b) discuss the sampling requirements with the testing laboratory. In reality, many investigators are not aware of the full range of capability or the existence of the services (e.g. forensic post-mortems, air weapon and other firearms analyses, or blood pattern analysis relating to injured animals), and such evidence is

often overlooked in both 'human' and 'animal' cases. Furthermore, when (or if) veterinary assessments are requested, these can produce essential documentary and physical evidence, relating to the condition of the animal, before and after death or injury. However, it should be noted that the majority of vets are not aware of forensic methods or their responsibilities in legal matters, as somewhat surprisingly, these topics are not key parts of their curriculum or professional development. All of these factors are troubling, not least because veterinary opinions are crucial in animal law, but because any form of animal cruelty must have occurred at the hands of a human perpetrator, and the fact that there is a growing global acknowledgement of the 'link' between animal and human crimes.

## Animal and Human Offences

The landscape of animal crime is as broad and complex as its human counterpart. Cases where forensic techniques have been applied include animal fraud, neglect, drowning, mutilation, poisoning, sexual assault and inappropriate methods of killing. Clearly these acts are perpetrated by humans and this level of cruelty rarely occurs in isolation, and a proclivity towards reoffending and an escalation in severity is often observed. Evidence for this not only exists in the anecdotal reports of animal abuse by notorious killers such as Ian Brady, Fred West, Steven Barker and Aaron Campbell, but also in the form of data collected by the Ministry of Justice. During 2009 to 2018, over 14,000 people in England and Wales who were cautioned or convicted of human offences, had also been previously cautioned or convicted of animal abuse<sup>1</sup>. Whilst this dataset

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/>

certainly includes multiple counts relating to the same offender, the figures are striking enough to warrant attention (**Table 1**).

**Table 1:** Number of people in England and Wales convicted or cautioned by offence type who previously had at least one or more convictions or cautions for cruelty to animals (Data source: Ministry of Justice, 2009-2018).

Offence Type	No. of Offenders
Violence against the person	1,637
Sexual offences	220
Robbery	176
Theft offences	5,642
Criminal damage and arson	237
Drug offences	2,797
Possession of weapons	587
Public order offences	1,090
Miscellaneous crimes against society	1,564
Fraud offences	258
<b>Total:</b>	<b>14,208</b>

Specific offences listed include murder, attempted murder, GBH/ABH, cruelty to or neglect of children and paedophilia. Therefore, crimes against animals must be taken seriously, particularly if a suspect has received multiple prior warnings. However, only rural and wildlife priorities currently fall under Policing strategies<sup>2</sup> and issues regarding animal welfare have been consolidated under separate legislation, which are enforced primarily by other agencies. Presently, if an offender is convicted under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, they can only receive a maximum of six months in prison and/or an unlimited fine<sup>3</sup>. Such penalties are unlikely to be acting as deterrents and the significant delay in hearing the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill,<sup>4</sup> is no doubt costing lives.

### Prediction or Prevention?

[foi-releases-for-december-2019](https://www.foi-releases-for-december-2019) or [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/592546/foi-107043-animal-cruelty.docx](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/592546/foi-107043-animal-cruelty.docx)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nwcu.police.uk/about/npcc-rural-and-wildlife-crime-strategy>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/offences/magistrates-court/item/animal-cruelty-revised-2017>

<sup>4</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8612>

The suggestion here is not that every person who harms an animal will progress to commit violent crimes against humans, but that the behaviour of certain individuals clearly requires a deeper examination by various members of society and representatives of the judicial system. By considering persons of interest and their relationships with animals, insight may be provided into other areas of their life and this is particularly true in the contexts of domestic violence, child abuse and elder maltreatment. Here, animal and human abuse occurs concurrently, with coercion and control as all too-common themes. If attention is given to the animals in the home (and those previously present), other 'hidden crimes' may be revealed. The National Link Coalition (USA) states that animal abuse is the tip of the iceberg, and that animals often become victims and pawns in the battles of power that typically mark domestic abuse. Drawing upon a substantial body of scientific research they conclude that: *when animals are abused, people are at risk; when people are abused, animals are at risk*<sup>5</sup>.

The Links Group, a multi-agency assembly in the UK echoes these sentiments<sup>6</sup>. The group promotes the awareness of the correlations between domestic offences and animal cruelty, and they report that over 50% of domestic abuse cases in the UK have involved threats and acts of violence towards family pets<sup>7</sup>. This is of particular relevance in light of data from the Office for National Statistics, which estimates that 2 million adults (aged 16 to 59 years) would have experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2018<sup>8</sup>. Acknowledging the lack of detail regarding juveniles or erroneous accusations in these figures, the probability that at least 50% of these incidents may have involved animals is of significance; especially as family members are more likely to seek medical intervention for their pets, than themselves or their children.

Just as the medical community has been trained

<sup>5</sup> <http://nationallinkcoalition.org>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk>

<sup>7</sup> <http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/175/23/579>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2018>



to recognise the 'battered child'<sup>9</sup>, greater awareness of the 'battered pet' is needed by the veterinary community<sup>10</sup>. Working with the Animal Welfare Foundation, the Links Group have developed guidance to support vets in safeguarding not only their patients, but the adults and children who may also be affected by domestic abuse. Building on the relationship of trust between veterinary staff and their clients, owners may disclose violence within the household and since early intervention is key, victims may be protected and further abuse prevented<sup>11</sup>.

### Why Pets? Why Vets?

It may seem something of an oxymoron that a perpetrator would deliberately injure an animal, only to later obtain veterinary care, but this be-

haviour continues the cycle of abuse and power. This type of manipulation and intimidation can take many forms, including supplying or denying financial support for treatment or food, suggesting additional threats to injure or kill 'next time' and blaming children for the cruelty, to create fractures within the family. As a result, victims will delay fleeing an abuser for fear of leaving the pet at risk of harm or death, or never being able to see them again - and these delays can cost lives. Whilst refuge services with pet fostering capabilities have increased, options are still limited<sup>12</sup>. The threat and actualisation of animal harm can have an immediate impact on the behaviour of an individual and creates long-term emotional distress, particularly when the acts are conducted in front of other victims. Children can also become desensitised to violence, displaying a lack of empathy and in some cases, a tendency to repeat learned behaviours. Conversely, they have also intervened, protecting the pet or other family members from their

9 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4623854/pdf/hkv040.pdf>

10 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11380013>

11 <https://www.animalwelfarefoundation.org.uk/animal-welfare-advice/guidance-for-vets/#recognising-abuse-in-animals-and-humans>

12 <https://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/what-about-pets>

abuser<sup>13</sup>. Such actions may be of significance in behavioural assessments, suggesting the need for additional support, that the home is unsafe, and that others may also be at risk.

The importance of the human-animal bond must not be underestimated. For many, pets are extensions of the family, and they may be the only source of comfort and companionship for victims of abuse, at any age. Recently, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, included references to abusive behaviour relating to pets in the Explanatory Notes<sup>14</sup> and it is hoped that the rehearing of the Domestic Abuse Bill will also include these provisions in England and Wales, as proposed in Northern Ireland<sup>15</sup>. As the sentinels of animal welfare, it is essential that veterinary staff are trained to have confidence in recognising non-accidental injuries, reporting their suspicions of animal cruelty to the appropriate authorities, and encouraging victims of domestic violence to seek help in a safe and timely fashion.

To assist, Forensic Access has developed 'The Forensic Process: Veterinary eCPD' courses for vets and veterinary nurses involved in cases of animal welfare and abuse<sup>16</sup>. By cascading the Court-compliant standards which traditional forensic scientists adhere to, alongside the advice developed by the Links Group and the diagnostic features of 'battered pets', the community will be better placed to assist such investigations. With a strong focus on contemporaneous record-keeping, the documentation of their actions and the behaviours of animals (and their owners), another form of animal evidence emerges.

## Summary

The primary aim of this piece is to raise awareness of the possibility of animal/human interactions as a potential source of information and

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13 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5904016/pdf/nihms957558.pdf>

14 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/5/notes/division/3/1/3/4>

15 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cm-public/DomesticAbuse/memo/DAB07.htm>

16 <https://forensic-access.co.uk/training-and-events/cpd-for-veterinary-surgeons-and-nurses-the-forensic-process-e-learning>

evidence, which may be applicable to a range of investigations. This may take the form of considering trace material which passes between animals, humans and their environments, or requesting a clinical or post-mortem examination of animal which is suspected of having suffered at the hands of a human perpetrator (either directly or accidentally), as a result of another animal, or to determine the presence of an underlying medical condition. The more traditional forensic disciplines (e.g. biology, toxicology, entomology, ballistics, digital evidence) may be employed to support or refute claims made by defendants, witnesses and legal representatives. Previous veterinary records relating to the history of the animal may be requested, to determine prior incidents of illness or injury, if welfare needs have been met, or the extent of 'Practice shopping' (whereby serial abusers seek treatment at different veterinary centres to avoid generating suspicion). Although maltreated companion animals may be an indicator of abuse within the domestic setting, any animal a person of interest may encounter (e.g. working animals, livestock, wildlife) could warrant further investigation, which may yield additional evidence of value.

In summary, the significance of animals and their associated caregivers should not be overlooked by investigators, legal teams, magistrates, judges and so forth – regardless of whether the case is of animal or human 'origin'. The presence, treatment and subsequent absence of animals, are noteworthy aspects in family and criminal law alike. Similarly, the behaviours of humans in animal law cases should be examined. Incidents of animal cruelty and abuse are rarely isolated events and these matters should no longer be treated as such.

## Author Profile

Samantha is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Science at the University of Bedfordshire and an Animal Forensics Consultant with Forensic Access. As an advocate of collaborative working, she is particularly dedicated to raising awareness of the links concept and determining appropriate forensic strategies, across both animal and human casework.

Forensic Access was established in 1986 by Home Office forensic scientists, initially to supply advice and guidance to defence lawyers.



Led by Professor Angela Gallop CBE (who steered the re-investigations of prominent cases such as Stephen Lawrence, Rachel Nickell and Damilola Taylor), the company evolved into an independent forensic service provider, assisting both prosecution and defence teams in almost equal measure. With a reputable heritage in human casework and an increase in requests for scientific support in animal abuse cases, the Animal Forensics Division was formed to unify forensic methodologies with veterinary medicine to develop bespoke investigative strategies.

Forensic Access hosts a number of seminars and webinars for the legal profession, including sessions on animal forensics and veterinary evidence. For more information about their services or training events, see their website at [www.forensic-access.co.uk](http://www.forensic-access.co.uk), or contact the office at: [science@forensic-access.co.uk](mailto:science@forensic-access.co.uk).