

# *To Leave or to Stay?*

## *Battered Women's Concern for Vulnerable Pets*

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*Consistent with previous research, almost half of a sample of 41 pet-owning battered women reported that their partners had threatened or actually harmed their pets, and over a fourth reported that concern for their pets had affected their decisions about leaving or staying with the batterer. Differences between rural and urban women were not significant, although higher proportions of rural than urban women reported that their partners had threatened or harmed their pets and that concern for their pets had affected their decisions. For the sample as a whole, logistic regression analyses showed that women whose pets had been threatened or harmed were significantly more likely to report that concern for their pets had affected their decisions about leaving or staying. The findings suggest that service providers should inquire about battered women's concern for their pets and should include arrangements for animals in safety planning.*

**Keywords:** *battered women; pets; animal abuse; animal welfare*

***The relationship between cruelty to animals*** and interpersonal violence in families is well documented (Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Lockwood & Ascione, 1998). Only recently, however, has attention turned explicitly to the role of companion animals in the lives of battered women. Indeed, a growing number of studies suggest that batterers often threaten or harm their partners' pets and that women may delay entering domestic violence shelters because of concern for the welfare of their pets left behind (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000; Weber, 1998; see also Adams, 1995).

After reviewing the relevant research, this study addresses two questions not previously explored. First, are there differences between battered women in urban and rural areas in their experiences of pet abuse and in the role of

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concern for pets in their decisions about leaving or staying in the home with their batterers? Second, to what extent do batterers' threats or actual harm to pets increase the likelihood that concern for pets will affect women's decisions about leaving the batterer? The answers to these questions have important implications for service providers' efforts to facilitate women's ability to seek refuge from their batterers.

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Only recently have researchers begun to examine the occurrence of animal abuse in households of women who are battered. In a study of 38 women in a domestic violence shelter in Utah, Ascione (1998) found that 74% of the women currently owned a pet or had owned a pet during the previous 12 months. Seventy-one percent of the pet owners reported that their batterer had threatened to harm the pet, and 57% reported that their batterer had actually harmed the pet. Moreover, almost a fifth (18%) of the pet owners reported that they had delayed entering the shelter because of concern for their pets' welfare.

Another study in Utah compared 101 women in five domestic violence shelters with a convenience sample of 120 women in the area who had no history of domestic violence (Ascione, Weber, Edwards, & Openshaw, reported in Ascione, 2000b; Weber, 1998). Seventy-two percent of the women in the shelters (hereafter referred to as the shelter group) reported that their partners had either threatened to harm or actually harmed their pets, and 54% reported that the pets had actually been hurt or killed. In contrast, 14.5% of the nonshelter comparison group reported partners' threats or actual harm to pets, and 5% reported that the pets had actually been hurt or killed. Almost a fourth of the women in the shelter group said they had not entered the shelter sooner because of concern for their pets. Finally, reports of the women in the shelter group revealed that the men who both threatened and committed animal abuse were more physically aggressive toward their partners than those men who only threatened abuse or who did not abuse animals.

Flynn (2000) surveyed 107 women in a domestic violence shelter in South Carolina. Forty-three of these women (40%) reported that they currently owned pets, and almost half (46.5%) of the pet owners reported that their pets had been threatened or actually harmed. Eight (40%) of the 20 women whose pets had been abused delayed entering the shelter due to concern for their pets' welfare, and 5 of these women delayed entering the shelter for more than 2 months. Interestingly, compared to the women whose pets had not been abused, the women whose pets had been abused were more likely to

report that their pets had been a very important source of emotional support during the abusive relationship. Moreover, almost half (49%) of the women with pets continued to worry about them after entering the shelter, and the women who reported animal abuse were four times more likely to worry about their pets.

It should be noted that the studies cited above assessed women in shelters who had obviously already made the decision to leave their homes. Thus, the researchers could ask whether concern for pets influenced the women to delay entering the shelter, presumably to protect their pets from harm by the batterer. Interestingly, none of the researchers asked whether concern for pets prompted the women to leave sooner than they would have left otherwise, taking their pets with them to a safer place.

Note, too, that the studies of battered women in shelters have been conducted in relatively urbanized areas or have not reported on the location of the shelters. Although some rural women may reside in urban shelters, studies conducted in shelters have not analyzed differences between urban and rural women's experiences of animal abuse. Lack of attention to rural battered women's concern for their pets is important for several reasons. Compared to women in urban areas, women in rural areas are more likely to have less common pets such as horses, goats, or other farm or nondomesticated animals. At the same time, rural women are more physically isolated and less likely to have access to services for themselves and shelters for their animals (see Lembke, 1999). To address the gaps in the literature regarding rural battered women, the current study investigates differences between urban and rural battered women in their concern for pets and in the impact of this concern on their decision to leave their batterers.

Several other previous studies included samples of battered women who were in a variety of domestic violence programs, not necessarily shelters. For example, during the mid-1990s, the LaCrosse (Wisconsin) Community Coalition Against Violence conducted several surveys of women in domestic violence programs throughout the state (Quinlisk, 1999). In their first survey, which included 12 programs, slightly more than two thirds (68%) of 72 respondents reported that they owned pets and had experienced incidents of pet abuse. In a second survey of 32 women in a smaller geographic region a year later, the coalition found that 72% of the respondents reported some type of violence toward their pet. Finally, in their survey of a small sample of men (specific *N* not provided) who were receiving treatment for battering their partners, the coalition found that approximately one third of the men admitted that they had threatened to give their partner's pet away, and over 30% reported that during their own childhood their parents had threatened to give their pet away as a means of controlling their behavior.

In Colorado Springs, Jorgenson and Maloney (1999) gathered data on incidences of animal abuse that were reported by participants in three components of their domestic violence program during a 3-year period. In the advocacy component, which served battered women still living with their abusers, 12% of 7,264 women completing intake interviews reported that their animals had been threatened, abused, or killed by their batterers. In the safehouse (shelter) component, 15.5% of 810 women entering the shelter reported that their pets had been abused or killed. Finally, in the component designed to treat the abusers, only 0.9% of 1,354 men interviewed acknowledged that they had committed any form of animal abuse. Jorgenson and Maloney interpreted the low incidence of reported animal abuse among men in the abusers' program as reflecting the men's denial that they are abusers.

The studies reviewed thus far either did not report the race or ethnicity of the women in their samples (Ascione, 1998; Jorgenson & Maloney, 1999; Quinlisk, 1999), or the samples were predominantly White women (Flynn, 2000). Moreover, only one study to date (Renzetti, 1992) has explicitly assessed incidences of animal abuse in households of lesbians who are battered. Using a feminist participatory research model, Renzetti (1992) obtained a sample of 100 battered lesbians by advertising her study through both mainstream and specialized newspapers and organizations in the United States and Canada. Her analysis revealed that 38% of battered lesbians with pets reported that their pets had also been abused by the batterer. Clearly, the web of violence that includes animal abuse extends to the lesbian community.

Despite the growing evidence that animal abuse often occurs in conjunction with domestic violence, few domestic violence shelters systematically assess animal abuse as part of their standard procedures. Ascione, Weber, and Wood (1997) surveyed one large domestic violence shelter in each of 48 states. Asked whether women who come into the shelter talk about incidents of companion animal abuse, 85.4% of the shelters responded affirmatively. Additionally, of the 46 shelters who responded to a question about whether children who enter the shelter talk about incidents of animal abuse, 63% responded affirmatively. Nevertheless, only 27.1% of the shelters actually asked questions about companion animals during intake interviews.

To summarize, the studies conducted to date have assessed the incidences of animal abuse in the context of domestic violence and have determined that women's concern for leaving their vulnerable pets may delay their departure from the abusive partner. Yet the role of pets in battered women's decision making must be viewed in the larger context of all the complex considerations that influence whether and at what point a woman leaves her batterer. Clearly, a woman's decision to leave an abusive partner is influenced by numerous factors, including financial issues, concerns about her children's

emotional and physical well-being, and her assessment of the safety risk involved in leaving a partner who may continue to pursue her and may retaliate physically, economically, or legally (Wilson, 1997). In short, concern for pets is only one of many factors in battered women's decision making. Thus, it is important to ask whether there are circumstances or populations in which pets are more likely to be targeted for abuse and in which women's concern for their pets is more likely to be an important factor in their decision about leaving the abuser.

As a partial answer to these questions, it seems clear that threats or harm to pets can be used to control or coerce a woman only to the extent that she cares about the animals. In this regard, recall that in Flynn's (2000) study, cited above, battered women whose pets had been abused were more likely to report that their pets had been a very important source of emotional support while they lived with their batterers. One plausible interpretation of this finding is that the batterers targeted the animals precisely because the women were emotionally attached to their pets, and thus hurting the animals was an effective way to intensify the emotional abuse of the women.

We could speculate further that women who are geographically or socially isolated are more likely to develop a strong emotional attachment to their pets. This strong attachment might then render the pets more likely targets of the batterer and would make it more likely that concern for pets would play a significant role in women's decisions about leaving the abuser. Finally, one might assume that the impact of a battered woman's concern for her pet on her decision-making process would be greater if her batterer had actually threatened or harmed her pet.

The current study addresses two factors identified in the preceding discussion. Because rural women are more isolated geographically, we examined whether their pets are more likely to be threatened or harmed than those of urban battered women. Second, we examined the impact of batterers' threats or actual harm to pets on the likelihood that concern for pets would affect women's decisions about leaving their batterers.

## METHOD

*Sample.* The respondents in the study were 61 women who were receiving services (as members of battered women's groups or as in-shelter residents) in two rural and four urban battered women's shelters in one region of a southeastern state. The two rural shelters were located in different counties but were part of the same nonprofit organization and served a total of 170 women during 2001. Two of the four urban shelters were affiliates of non-

profit, sectarian (specifically, nondenominational Christian) organizations, serving 133 women and 420 women, respectively, during 2001. The other two urban shelters were affiliated with a nonprofit, nonsectarian family services organization and served a total of 350 women in 2001.

*Data collection.* The data were collected between May 2001 and January 2002. To expedite the human subjects review process, and in light of the very limited resources available for this study, the researchers relied on the staff members of the shelters to ask clients for their voluntary participation in the study and to distribute the questionnaires. The staff members' work responsibilities did not make it possible for them to personally administer the questionnaires to clients, but staff members did assist clients who asked for help in completing the questionnaire. Thus, in short, the questionnaires were either self-administered or were completed by the respondents with assistance from one of the shelter staff members.

*Measures.* One section of the study questionnaire assessed demographic information including age, education, race, current marital status, and number of children. The following three questions from Ascione's (2000) Domestic Violence Pet Abuse Survey were used to assess partners' threat to pets, partners' harm to pets, and whether concern for pets' welfare affected the women's decision-making process:

1. Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?
2. Has your partner ever actually hurt or killed one of your pets?
3. Does concern over your pet's welfare affect your decision making about staying with or leaving your partner?

Because our sample included battered women who were receiving services (group treatment) but had not yet left their batterers as well as women who had left their homes and were residing in the shelters, we used questions that would be relevant to women in both situations. It would have been ideal to use separate sets of questions for women in these two situations (that is, those residing at home but participating in battered women's groups and those residing in the shelter). Separate sets of questions would have enabled us to determine, specifically, whether women had remained (or were remaining) in the home to protect their pets or whether they had left (or were planning to leave) their homes, taking their pets with them, to protect the pets. However, given our limited resources and reliance on shelter staff members to assist with the research, we used only one set of questions to make administration of the questionnaires as simple as possible. Thus, we were

only able to ascertain whether concern for pets affected the women's decision making, regardless of whether her concern hastened or delayed her departure.

*Analysis.* Descriptive statistics were used to compare rural and urban women on experiences of pet abuse and on concern for pets as a factor in their decision to seek shelter. Logistic regression analyses were used to determine whether partners' threat to pets (yes or no) and partners' actual harm to pets (yes or no) predicted concern for pets as a factor in pet-owning women's decisions about leaving or staying with their partners (yes or no). These three variables were measured with single, clearly stated questions. Given the relatively small sample in this study, only a limited number of variables could be entered into the regression analyses.

## RESULTS

Questionnaires were partially or fully completed by 61 women. Of this total, 82% (50 women) had owned pets during the previous 12 months. Forty-one pet owners (41.5% rural and 58.5% urban) provided complete data on the three primary variables of interest: whether their partner had threatened their pets, whether their partner had actually harmed their pets, and whether concern for pets had affected their decision to leave or stay. Thus, our analysis focused on these 41 respondents.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of these 41 respondents. The large standard deviations on the variable of age reflect the wide range of ages in the sample. Rural women ranged in age from 21 years to 54 years, with a mean of 36.6; urban women ranged in age from 19 years to 72 years, with a mean of 35.8. On average, urban women had more children; the range in number of children for both rural and urban women was none to three. Higher proportions of rural than urban women were married, and higher proportions of urban than rural women had completed high school, but neither of these differences was statistically significant. Differences between rural and urban women on the variable of race were not statistically significant but should be interpreted cautiously. Of the 17 rural respondents, 2 did not complete the question on race. Additionally, the questionnaire used the term *Native American*, which some respondents may have interpreted as meaning "native-born U.S. citizen" rather than American Indian, as was intended.

Twenty (48.8%) of the 41 women reported that their partner had threatened their pets, 19 (46.3%) reported that their partner had actually harmed

**TABLE 1: Characteristics of Pet-Owning Women by Rural/Urban Status**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Rural</i> n = 17	<i>Urban</i> n = 24	<i>Statistical</i> <i>Significance</i>
Age			
<i>M (SD)</i>	36.6 (10.2)	35.8 (13.1)	ns ( $t = .199, p = .84$ )
Number of children			
<i>M (SD)</i>	1.0 (1.1)	1.9 (.8)	$t = -2.9, p = .006$
% High school diploma or GED	47.1	62.5	ns ( $\chi^2 = .96, p = .32$ )
% Married	52.9	37.5	ns ( $\chi^2 = .96, p = .32$ )
% Women of color	40.0 <sup>a</sup>	12.5	ns ( $\chi^2 = 3.9, p = .06$ )

a. Due to missing data,  $n = 15$  for rural women on the variable of race.

**TABLE 2: Concern for Pets Predicted by Partner Threat and Partner Harm: Bivariate Logistic Regressions**

<i>Predictor</i>	$\chi^2$	B	p	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Threaten	8.9	1.97	.02	7.14
Harm	9.6	2.07	.02	7.96

their pets, and 11 (26.8%) reported that concern for the welfare of their pets had affected their decision to leave or to stay with their batterers. Higher proportions of rural than urban women reported that their partners had threatened (58.8% vs. 41.7%) or actually harmed (58.8% vs. 37.5%) their pets. Additionally, a higher proportion of rural than urban women (41.2% vs. 16.7%) reported that concern for their pets had affected their decision about leaving or staying in the home with their batterer. However, none of these differences between rural and urban women was statistically significant.

As Table 2 shows, the logistic regression analyses indicated that women whose partners had threatened their pets were approximately seven times (odds ratio 7.1) more likely to report that concern for their pets had affected their decision about leaving or staying with their batterer. Similarly, women whose partners had actually harmed or killed their pets were almost eight times (odds ratio 7.9) more likely to report that concern for their pets had affected their decision about leaving or staying. Differences between rural and urban women, however, were not significant.



## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce and expand previous research demonstrating that concern for the welfare of vulnerable pets is a factor in many battered women's decisions about whether to leave their batterers. Several findings, in particular, are worthy of elaboration.

To begin, our findings showed that rural as well as urban women reported that their pets had been threatened or harmed and that concern for pets played a role in their decision about leaving or staying with their batterers. Indeed, although the differences between rural and urban women were not statistically significant, higher proportions of rural than urban women reported threat, harm, and concern for pets. In a larger sample, these differences may have been statistically significant, and thus future research should continue to include rural women and should conduct comparative analyses of rural and urban women. Additionally, such research should control for potentially confounding factors such as degree of social isolation experienced by both rural and urban women.

As noted earlier, compared to urban women, rural women may have more or different types of pets, and they may have less access to services or help for themselves and their pets. Moreover, because rural women are more isolated geographically, they may develop stronger attachments to their pets. Batterers may then be more likely to target the pets for abuse because of the women's attachment to these animals. At the same time, compared to urban areas, abuse of pets in isolated rural environments is more likely to go undetected by surrounding neighbors and communities. Thus, the role of pets in the decision-making process of rural battered women requires further research and demands the attention of programs for domestic violence prevention and intervention.

Additionally, as anticipated, we found that battered women's concern for their pets was more likely to be a factor in their decision making if their partners had actually threatened or harmed the pets. Moreover, the magnitude of this effect was large and was similar whether the partner had threatened or actually harmed the pet. This finding, which was predictable, is nevertheless noteworthy because our study, in accordance with previous research, also found that threat or harm to pets is quite common in the households of battered women. Taken together, these findings suggest that when pets are present, the welfare of the pets may be a significant factor in women's decisions about whether to leave or stay with their batterers. Further research is needed to determine the circumstances in which pets are most likely to be targeted for abuse and in which concern for pets is most likely to be a factor in battered women's decision-making process. Additionally, research should seek to

determine the amount of variance in battered women's decisions that is explained by concern for pets compared to the variance explained by other factors in the decision-making process.

In the meantime, it is imperative that service providers ask battered women whether they have pets, whether their pets have been threatened or harmed, and whether they are concerned about the welfare of their pets. These questions invite a battered woman to talk about her concerns for her animals, which she may not have felt were "legitimate" topics for discussion when her own and her children's welfare were the primary subjects of conversation.

At the same time, service providers must begin to address women's concerns by working with animal welfare agencies and veterinarians to develop "safe haven" programs to care for the pets of women who have no alternative place for their animals (see Ascione, 2000a). Such programs remove an important barrier to women's ability to leave their batterers.

In sum, when pets are at risk, battered women's concern for their vulnerable animals may affect their decision-making process. Thus, service providers must offer women an opportunity to discuss their concerns about their pets, and arrangements for pets must be included in safety planning for women attempting to leave their batterers.

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