



Support H.R. 712, the Child and Animal Abuse Detection and Reporting Act

Improve Our Understanding of Children's Exposure to Animal Cruelty in Abusive Homes



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H.R. 712, introduced by Representatives Jeff Van Drew (R-NJ) and Julia Brownley (D-CA), amends the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to expand the data collected around child abuse cases to include information about animal abuse. To more accurately examine trends in child abuse and neglect, it is critical to pay attention to animal abuse as a risk factor within the family. H.R. 712 would create a better foundation for child abuse screening, prevention, and treatment programs and thus provide substantial benefits to children, families, and pets.

Link between animal and child abuse

In a violent household, companion animals are often victims of the very same abuse that children, intimate partners, and vulnerable adults are suffering. Decades of research and practical experience have firmly established this link. In fact, the first person to suspect that a family may be in crisis could well be a law enforcement officer responding to an animal cruelty call.

There is greater understanding today that awareness of the presence of animal abuse in the home leads to better protection for the animals and for other members of the family. Children in such homes are doubly at risk: In addition to the direct abuse they may be suffering, children are particularly likely to experience long-term adverse effects from witnessing—or even being forced to participate in—the mistreatment of their pets.

There is substantial evidence linking child and animal well-being:

- Children form close bonds with their pets, often referring to them as their “best friends” and reporting that they turn to them when troubled.
- Children are traumatized when caretakers threaten or harm pets. Traumatized children are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence.
- In a number of criminal cases, abusers have threatened to harm animals in an effort to silence child sex abuse victims.
- Children who are cruel to animals are more likely than other children to have been maltreated. Cruelty to animals as an indicator of child maltreatment strengthens with the child's age, persistence of behavior, and disadvantaged background.
- In a phenomenon known as “polyvictimization,” children may be traumatized by a variety of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including animal abuse. To successfully intervene and treat children and families, all ACEs that contribute to polyvictimization must be addressed.

A study published by the NIH raises grave concerns: “In addition to the potential for being physically victimized by an animal abuser in the home, researchers and clinicians have recognized that simply *witnessing* animal cruelty may have negative effects; for example, women who witnessed animal abuse by their domestic partner reported more psychological distress and lower levels of social support than either men or binary individuals (Riggs et al., 2018). There is growing evidence that witnessing animal abuse can negatively affect children as well (e.g., Ascione et al., 2007; Becker et al., 2004; Daly & Morton, 2008; Girardi & Pozzulo 2015; McDonald et al., 2016).”¹



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In current data collection on child abuse, a key risk factor is missing: animal abuse.

Similarly, an article published in the FBI's *Law Enforcement Bulletin* entitled *The Link Between Animal Cruelty and Human Violence* acknowledges animal cruelty as a form of domestic violence and makes clear the connection between animal abuse in the home and child abuse, and the likelihood of ongoing negative effects: "Other studies have shown that half of all children are exposed to animal cruelty at some point in their lives. Children who are exposed to interpersonal violence at home are 60 times more likely to suffer emotional maltreatment and physical abuse or neglect. These circumstances place children at an increased risk of perpetuating the cycle of violence in the future due to desensitization and the belief that violence is an acceptable way to resolve interpersonal conflict."²

Clearly there is an urgent need for more complete information about these patterns so that child welfare agencies can understand how to intervene safely and effectively.

Current Data Collected on Child Abuse

State child protection agencies voluntarily provide data to the federal government under the National Child Abuse and Neglect

Data System (NCANDS), which tracks trends in child abuse and neglect across the country. Case reports on the nearly 700,000 US children abused annually include a variety of details—such as the type of mistreatment a child suffered or whether the caregiver had a substance abuse disorder—that help researchers and service providers better understand the factors associated with child abuse. These data inform the development of screening and preventive services and allow analysis of victim, caretaker, and perpetrator characteristics, as well as responses to abused/neglected children in need of services.

Information collected under NCANDS has been used to determine, for example, that children whose families face multiple stressors are at a higher risk of being repeatedly referred to Child Protective Services, and that some types of maltreatment are more likely to recur than others. Adding animal abuse to the range of stressors that are measured will give service providers and others a needed additional window into the lives of abused children and may help identify at-risk children who otherwise would have gone undetected. A study of child protection case referrals in Australia³ is a cautionary tale that all child welfare professionals should heed: "Reports of animal abuse in child protection referrals may indicate more severe cases of child abuse. ... Child protection referrals which mention animals may prompt the assessing clinician to consider this aspect of the child's environment, however clinicians rarely enquire about animals in the home unless so prompted. Second, psychosocial assessment practices which include consideration of animals within the home may increase the likelihood that child abuse allegations are substantiated."

To cosponsor H.R. 712, please contact Noah Garber in Rep. Van Drew's office at Noah.Garber@mail.house.gov or Sharon Wagener in Rep. Brownley's office at sharon.wagener@mail.house.gov. For additional information, please contact Nancy Blaney, director of government affairs at the Animal Welfare Institute, at nancy@awionline.org, or 202-446-2141.

1. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7683760/#:~:text=Some%20children%20may%20demonstrate%20externalizing,2004>
2. <https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/the-link-between-animal-cruelty-and-human-violence>
3. https://www.academia.edu/60758232/Reports_of_animal_abuse_in_child_protection_referrals_A_study_of_cases_from_one_South_Australian_service