

Betty Barrett, Amy Fitzgerald, Amy Peirone, Rochelle Stevenson, Chi Ho Cheung, Help-Seeking Among Abused Women With Pets: Evidence From a Canadian Sample, Violence and Victims, published 2018, Springer Publishing Company DOI 10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-17-00072

The original publication is available at www.springerlink.com.

Help-Seeking Among Abused Women With Pets: Evidence From a Canadian Sample

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Help-seeking among abused women with pets: Evidence from a Canadian sample

Pet ownership is common among survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), with 40% to 92% of women sampled in domestic violence shelters owning pets/companion animals at the time of entry (Ascione, 1998; Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Flynn, 2000). The midpoint of this range would be roughly consistent with pet ownership among the general population: approximately 65% of US homes (America Pet Products Association, 2017) and 57% of homes in Canada (Canadian Pet Market Outlook, 2014) have at least one pet. Further, the research indicates that the majority of "pet owners" consider their pets family members (Cain, 1985; Veevers, 1985) and valuable sources of emotional support (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Sable, 1995), and are often willing to spend a great deal of money on them. It is estimated that the Canadian pet market (comprised of food, veterinary services, etc.) will be worth \$9.2 billion by the year 2019 (Canadian Pet Market Outlook, 2014). It is therefore fair to assume that the majority of survivors of IPV have pets and that these pets are likely to be considered family members, which means that understanding the role they play in the lives of survivors is crucial for policy and practice.

Despite an increased awareness of the co-occurrence of animal abuse and other forms of family violence such as IPV, research on how this co-occurrence of abuse is related to survivors' help seeking efforts and decisions to terminate abusive relationships is limited. While there is research on motivations and deterrents to seeking help in cases of IPV, the existing literature examining the presence of companion animals plays in either facilitating or deterring women's attempts to seek help or end relationships in the aftermath of IPV is sparse. Canadian studies are

even more scarce. To address these gaps in the literature, this study utilized a sample of IPV survivors in Canadian shelters to explore the role that companion animals, and their abuse, play in facilitating or deterring women's attempts to seek help or end abusive relationships.

Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse

The co-occurrence of animal abuse and interpersonal violence has received increasing research attention over the last couple of decades (see Ascione, 2008 and Unti, 2008 for an overview). In particular, the abuse of pets has been found to be positively associated with IPV, with rates of co-occurrence in shelter samples¹ ranging from 25% to 86% (Ascione, Weber, Thompson, Heath, Maruyama, & Hayashi, 2007; Author blinded for peer review; Carlisle-Frank et al., 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Strand and Faver, 2005). A couple of studies have also included community samples of women to ascertain if the levels of animal maltreatment reported among samples of abused women in shelters are high relative to women who have not experienced IPV. In one of these studies, Ascione and colleagues (2007) compared experiences of animal abuse among survivors recruited via shelters in one state in the United States (n=101) with a group of women from the community who had not experienced IPV (n=120), and found that the shelter sample was 11 times more likely to report that their partner had killed or hurt their pets. The other study, conducted in Australia by Volant, Johnson, Gullone, and Coleman (2008), compared a sample of women recruited from a variety of domestic violence services (n= 102) with a group of women from the community who did not

¹ It is worth emphasizing here that this body of literature has relied primarily on samples of women in shelters. These samples may not be generalizable to those experiencing IPV among the general population in terms of financial resources, severity of abuse, and even the type of abuser (see Johnson 2006, 2008, 2011). For research on the relationship between animal abuse and IPV among a representative sample of the general population, see Author (blinded for peer review).

experience domestic violence (n=102), and found that women who reported animal abuse by their partner were over five times more likely to be in the IPV group compared to the non-violence group.

Other studies indicate that batterers who abuse pets are more dangerous in that they perpetrate more types of IPV, more severe IPV, and exhibit more controlling behavior (Author blinded for peer review; Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber & Miles, 2013; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). Abuse of animals and children has been identified by Johnson (2006) as an element of coercive control that may be used to distinguish between some types of abusers. It has also been suggested that extreme violence towards partners and pets may be related to psychobiologically grounded attachment disorders (Maiuro, Eberle, Rastaman, and Snowflake, 2008). Although it has long been hypothesized in the literature that animal abuse and IPV so commonly co-occur because animal abuse is instrumentalized by abusers to control the human victims of IPV, preliminary evidence indicates that while abused women are likely to perceive threats against pets, emotional animal abuse, and animal neglect as being motivated to upset and control them, they are less likely to view the perpetration of physical animal abuse in this way (Author, blinded for peer review). Further research is needed to better understand the reasons behind the perceived differences in motivation.

Regardless of how and why animal maltreatment is perpetrated, it is evident in this research that pets provide an important form of emotional support for many survivors of IPV, and are a source of protection, strength, and security (Fitzgerald, 2007; Flynn, 2000; Hardesty et al., 2013). Some studies also indicate that the higher degree of attachment a woman has with a pet, the greater risk that that pet will be abused (Flynn, 2000; Hardesty et al., 2013). Thus, it is not

surprising that women whose pets are abused by their batterers suffer a series of negative psychological and emotional outcomes, including feelings of increased fear, anger, guilt, and grief (Adams, 1994; Faver & Strand, 2007; Flynn, 2000).

The connection between abused women and their pets is especially relevant when considering the factors that influence and impede help seeking in cases of IPV. When women experience IPV, they often must decide whether to seek help and/or to terminate the abusive relationship. Given the private nature of IPV, if survivors do not initiate the pursuit of help on their own, the opportunities for support are limited. Understanding the factors that influence decisions related to help-seeking in cases of IPV are crucial to ensuring support services meet the needs of survivors and thus encourage survivors to seek help and/or terminate abusive relationships.

Intimate Partner Violence and Help-Seeking

Research on help-seeking suggests that “survivors of IPV engage in a wide range of help-seeking behaviors in response to violence” (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011, p. 59). Help-seeking includes informal mechanisms, such as disclosure or talking to family and friends, and formal help-seeking, including reporting IPV to the police, entering a shelter, or seeking professional counseling services (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Kaukinen, 2002; Hyman et al., 2006; Meyer, 2010; Shannon, Logan, Cole & Medley, 2006). Regardless of having a variety of both informal and formal pathways to help, many survivors of IPV do not seek help (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Henning & Klesges, 2002; Kaukinen, 2004). Estimates of the prevalence of help-seeking tend to range from 20-80% depending on the type of help-seeking (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Hyman et al., 2006); studies do indicate that survivors tend to seek informal help more frequently than

formal help (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Meyer, 2010). This has prompted researchers to explore the specific factors that influence help-seeking decisions among people involved with abusive partners. Some of the key findings indicate variations based on sociodemographic factors (Hyman et al., 2006; Henning & Klesges, 2002; Kaukinen, 2004; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000; Kim & Gray, 2008; Shannon et al., 2006), violence and situational characteristics (Meyer, 2010; Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011), and attitudes towards and previous experiences with the police (Wolf et al., 2003).

While myriad factors have been found to be associated with seeking help, the most consistent factors correlated with help seeking are within the domain of the type and severity of violence experienced. Specifically, research suggests that survivors who experience physical forms of IPV (e.g. Duterte, Bonomi, Kernic, Schiff, Thompson, & Rivera, 2008), those who experience a higher number of incidents of violence (e.g. Macy, Nurius, Kernic, & Holt, 2005), those who have experienced injury (e.g. Fanslow & Robinson, 2010), and those who believe their lives are in danger (e.g. Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011) are more likely to elicit assistance than those who experience non-physical forms of violence and/or violence that is less frequent and/or severe. In contrast to the consistent picture that has emerged in the literature regarding the role of violence characteristics and help seeking, there is less consensus among scholars about the exact nature of socio-demographic variations in help seeking. For example, while some studies have found that those with higher incomes (e.g. Duterte et al, 2008) and higher levels of education (e.g. Coker, Derrick, Lumpkin, Aldrich, & Oldendick, 2000) are more likely to seek help, others have found that help seeking is most common among those with lower levels of education (e.g. Meyer, 2010) and income (e.g. Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). Further, although a handful of studies

suggest that IPV survivors who are members of ethnic minority populations may be more likely to seek help than those who are white (e.g. Flicker, Cerulli, Zhao, Tange, Watts, Xia, & Talbot, 2011), a sizeable body of research has documented a range of factors that serve as a barrier to help seeking among racialized survivors and those who are immigrants, lessening their likelihood of soliciting assistance. Still other research has documented that survivors' prior experiences with sources of help may be correlated with their likelihood of seeking help in the future. For example, research on survivors' interactions with law enforcement has found that survivors who have had negative prior experiences with the police are less likely to endorse a willingness to seek help from police in the future (Wolf et al, 2003). In addition to studies documenting correlates of various types of help seeking, some research has focused on the pathways or mechanisms involved in the decision-making processes in help-seeking. For instance, in their model of help-seeking among survivors of IPV, Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, and Weintraub (2005) highlight three stages of help-seeking: defining the problem, deciding to seek help, and choosing a source of support. Help-seeking is described as a process whereby women continually adjust their appraisals of whether they are involved in a problematic situation, if they need help or need to leave a situation, and how best to achieve safety.

Once a survivor has recognized or defined their abusive relationship as problematic, how she responds is dependent on an analysis of the costs and benefits of seeking help and of staying in or leaving the relationship (Thomas, Goodman, & Putnins, 2015; Stork, 2008). When women seek help, it is most often to achieve immediate safety and to stop the violence (Barrett, St. Pierre, & Vallaincourt, 2011; Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Lyon, Bradshaw & Menard, 2011; Vatnar & Bjorkly, 2009). In doing so, survivors assess a series of "trade-offs" or safety-seeking

strategies (Thomas et al., 2015). In their exploration of safety-related trade-offs among survivors seeking domestic violence services in the United States, Thomas et al. (2015) found that the main impediment reported by survivors was related to feelings of loss, and the notion that loss outweighs benefits. This theme of loss was often tied to leaving things behind, and giving up possessions, as one survivor stressed that there are “limitations to what a person can bring” into shelters for instance (Thomas et al., 2015, p. 174). In addition to the losses incurred when exiting an abusive relationship, there can be physical risks to the survivor in the form of escalated violence (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Thomas et al., 2015; Stork, 2008). The potential of escalation may “impede or even halt survivors' efforts to become safer” (Thomas et al., 2015, p. 171), as costs to exiting an abusive relationship may be perceived as greater than the costs to staying in it (Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

The complexities of this decision-making process are even more pronounced when considering the role that companion animals play in facilitating or impeding a woman’s decision to seek formal help when involved in abusive relationships. Survivors of IPV engage in a continual cost-benefit analysis when deciding to seek help, and knowing where pets fit into this decision-making process is important, especially if we want to encourage help-seeking by ensuring that the available supports and services meet the actual needs of survivors.

Intimate Partner Violence, Animal Abuse, and Help-Seeking

While there is a very small body of literature assessing how having a companion animal ties into survivors’ help-seeking efforts, it suggests that pets do influence help-seeking decision-making among some survivors of IPV (Ascione et al., 1997; Gallagher et al., 2008; Carlise-Frank et al., 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2007; Flynn, 2000). Pets are a source of emotional

support, comfort, and safety, and are often viewed as family members (Fitzgerald, 2007; Flynn, 2000), so it is understandable that some women may not want to be separated from their pets and might fear leaving them with their abuser.

To date, there are only a few shelters for abused women (mostly in the US) where pets are also able to stay. Some shelters have other programs, such as agreements with veterinary clinics, community members, and humane societies to care for pets while women are in shelter, although many of these programs are short-term. Additionally, one study found that even when these off-site programs are in place, a significant proportion of survivors (nearly half of their sample) are not informed of the programs, and many others (25% of their sample) are informed, but only once they were already in shelter (Authors, blinded for peer review). The inability to take their pets with them or to find other suitable arrangements, and a fear of leaving their pets with the abuser (Ascione, 1998; Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2007; Flynn, 2000), may keep some women in abusive relationships. Additionally, a less direct relationship between pets and delayed help-seeking has been noted by Fitzgerald (2007), who found that women reported that having pets provided them with the support they needed to remain in the abusive relationships.

There is empirical evidence that some survivors do delay leaving an abusive relationship due to concern for their pet. Among samples in the US, the percentage of pet-owning female survivors who report that concern for their pets kept them in relationships longer ranges from approximately 20% to 88% (Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn, 2000; Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Faver & Strand, 2006; Strand, 2003; Strand & Faver, 2005); a wide range, to be sure.² Among Canadian

² This wide range may be due to the tendency to use relatively small, single-site samples.

samples, the proportion of women who report delayed leaving due to their pets has ranged from 43% to 56% (Daniell, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2007; McIntosh, 2004). One limitation of this literature is that it has relied on samples of women who are already in shelter. It is unknown how many women may never go to shelter explicitly because they will not leave their pet. Some insight is provided into this problem by Fitzgerald (2005; 2007)'s work. Three of her 26 interviewees were still with their abusive partners (they were accessed through support groups instead of shelters), and one of these women explicitly stated that she had never gone to a shelter and never would, even though she had been encouraged to do so by the police, because she could not take her dog with her. Further evidence of this reality comes from a recent survey of shelter staff also in Canada which indicates that approximately three-quarters of the 116 respondents were aware of women who had not come to shelter due to concern for their pets (Authors, blinded for review).

A few studies have begun to unpack the relationship between pet ownership and help-seeking; these studies indicate that other factors can impact this relationship, namely whether or not their abuser also mistreated their pet and whether or not they have children. Among the few samples where it has been assessed, animal maltreatment by an abusive partner is related to a higher likelihood of reported delayed leaving (Ascione et al., 1997; Carlisle-Frank et al., 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003). For instance, Carlisle-Frank et al. (2004) state that while 48% of their sample reported delaying leaving their abuser because of their pets, this proportion increased to approximately 65% if their pets had been abused by their partner. A few years prior, Ascione and colleagues (1997) also found variations in survivors' decisions to enter a shelter based on whether their pets were threatened or harmed: just over 20% of their sample who reported their pets had not been mistreated indicated they had delayed leaving due to concern for their pet,

whereas among those who did report their abuser had mistreated their pet, 34% indicated the concern for their pet had caused them to delay leaving. We have been unable to locate any studies that have examined the potentially divergent impacts of the perpetration of different types of animal maltreatment.

The research also indicates that concern for their pets does not end once they have made the decision to leave their abusive partner. Again, research with shelter samples indicates that survivors continue to worry about their pets once they are in shelter (Faver and Strand, 2007; Flynn, 2000), particularly because it is often the case that pets are left with batterers (Authors, blinded for peer review). Approximately one-third of a sample of women in shelter reported that they were considering leaving and going home to their abuser because he had their pets (Authors, blinded for peer review). There are other reports of women leaving shelters periodically to check on pets or returning to abusive relationships due to concern for the safety of their pets (Ascione et al., 1997; Fitzgerald, 2007; McIntosh, 2004).

Although in the majority of cases it appears that having companion animals, particularly in the absence of children and/or if the animals are mistreated by the abuser, acts as a deterrent to seeking help, especially formal help, some women have reported the opposite. In one study, a small proportion female survivors of IPV (12%) indicated that the abuse of pets encouraged or motivated them to leave an abusive partner and seek shelter (Strand & Faver, 2005, p. 48).

Against this backdrop, the current study was designed to further unpack how the presence of pets and specific types of animal maltreatment are related to help-seeking and relationship termination among abused women. The overarching question guiding this work is: what role does animal maltreatment (in the form of emotional animal abuse, threats to harm pets, animal

neglect, physical animal abuse, and severe physical animal abuse) play in motivating or deterring women's attempts to seek help and/or terminate abusive partnerships in the aftermath of IPV?

Methods

Sampling

The present study contains data collected at 16 first stage housing organizations (emergency shelters) serving survivors of IPV in Canada. The sampling frame was comprised of all emergency shelters listed in a comprehensive published directory of Canadian transition houses and battered women's shelters (Government of Canada, 2008). We selected an initial sample of 40 shelters from this listing to invite to collaborate in a research study investigating the intersection of animal abuse and abuse in the lives of sheltered battered women as well organizational policies and practices used by shelters to address this intersection.³ A purposive sampling design was used to select shelters that reflected geographic diversity across Canada as well as shelters of varying size. Of the initial 40 shelters invited to collaborate on this research, 16 agreed to serve as sites of data collection from shelter residents on measures of IPV, pet abuse, and the nature of women's relationships with both their partners and their pets.

The most commonly given reason for declining to participate was a lack of time. Nonetheless, the 16 shelters who participated provided good geographic representation, with the notable exceptions that we were unable to secure participation from the province of Quebec (although we did recruit some Francophone participants from our other sites) and the Northern Territories, where services for abused women are much less centralized than in most of the rest

³ As part of the larger study, staff members were also surveyed to gather information about knowledge of the co-occurrence of animal abuse and IPV, any shelter-specific policies regarding pets, and policy recommendations (citation removed for blind review).

of the country. The average number of women who participated at each shelter was approximately seven. The shelters with the largest number of respondents were from the most populous province (Ontario) and the smallest numbers of respondents were from the least populated provinces (i.e., Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island). On average, just over half of the participants at the shelters reported having pets while with their abusive partner.

Data Collection

Research Ethics Board (REB) approval was obtained by the research team via the Institutional REBs of all project team members. To protect the confidentiality of shelter residents, data for this project was collected by shelter staff. Prior to engaging in data collection, the research team briefed each site on ethical protocols for survey administration and handling of confidential data. To thank the staff of participating shelter sites for their assistance in facilitating the research, each shelter was provided a \$25 gift card to a local coffee shop.

Shelter staff provided an overview of the research to shelter residents, including informed consent, and then distributed hard copies of the survey and informed consent forms to interested participants. Residents were then asked to self-administer the written survey in private at a time and location of their choosing. Upon completion of the survey, residents were directed to return the survey and signed informed consent form back to shelter staff in a sealed envelope. Respondents were then provided a \$5 gift card to a local coffee shop to thank them for their participation. After all surveys had been returned, shelter staff then compiled the surveys and provided the complete package of research materials to the research team.

Participants

Of the 100 residents who returned surveys, eighty-six elected to answer questions regarding whether or not they had owned companion animals during the abusive relationship which directly preceded their entry into the shelter, and thus comprise the sample for the present study. A description of this sample is outlined in Table 1. [Insert Table 1 about here]. Of the 86 respondents included in this study, 64.0% stated that they had owned a pet with their abusive partner. Cats (78.2%) followed by dogs (63.6%) were the most commonly reported animal companions. An overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of survivors with companion animals is provided in Table 1.

Measures

Predictor Variables

Animal abuse. Types and severity of animal abuse were measured using the Partner's Treatment of Animals Scale (PTAS; Fitzgerald, Barrett, Shwom, Stevenson, & Chernyak, 2016). The PTAS is a 21 item measure that contains five distinct subscales measuring violence against animals specifically in the context of IPV: (1) *Emotional Abuse of Animal* (for example, confined the pet in an inappropriately small space for an extended period of time, left pet outside longer than deemed safe, chased pet with intent to harm); (2) *Threats to Harm Animal* (for example, threatened to get rid of a pet to make the survivor do something, threatened to harm a pet); (3) *Physical Neglect of Animal* (for example, refused to feed a pet, refused to provide water for a pet, refused to provide pet with medicine for an ongoing health condition); (4) *Physical*

Abuse of Animal (for example, smacked a pet, kicked a pet, forced a pet to fight another animal); and (5) *Severe Physical Abuse of Animal* (for example, broke a pet's bones, drowned a pet, killed a pet). The frequency with which each individual item occurred was scored on a continuum from zero to four (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = occasionally, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently). A composite score for each subscale of the PTAS was obtained by summing the individual items within the subscale, with higher scores indicative of higher levels of animal abuse. Each subscale of the PTAS has been found to have acceptable reliability ($\alpha > .80$).

Intimate partner violence. Physical IPV experienced by survivors was assessed using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The CTS-2 is a widely-used measure in studies of IPV which assesses conflict tactics used by partners in romantic relationships. Conflict tactics that involve the use of physical forms of violence between partners is assessed via the *Physical Assault* subscale. This subscale includes 12 items assessing both minor and severe forms of assault including behaviors such as threw something at my partner that could hurt, twisted my partner's arm or hair, pushed or shoved my partner, choked my partner, and burned or scalded my partner on purpose. Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently their partners engaged in each tactic (0 = this never happened; 1 = once in the past year; 2 = twice in the past year; 3 = 3-5 times in the past year; 4 = 6-10 times in the past year; 5 = 11-20 times in the past year; 6 = more than 20 times in the past year; or 7 = not in the past year but it did happen before). The *Physical Assault* subscale of the CTS-2 has been found to have acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .86$) as well as both construct and discriminant validity (Straus et al., 1996). For the present study, we created a composite score for the *Physical Assault* subscale by summing the total number of items that the respondent indicated she had

ever experienced (with higher scores indicative of a higher number of forms of physical assault experienced). This was done instead of creating a summative score for each item response because response option 7 indicates that specific act has ever happened to them, whereas response options 1 through 6 measure the frequency of that action over the past year.

Length of abusive relationship. The length of the relationship between the survivor and perpetrator was assessed with the question: *How long have you been/were you and your partner/abuser in a relationship?* A dummy variable was created (0=relationship less than two years in length and 1= relationship length longer than two years) for use in our analyses.

Outcome Variables

Previous attempts to leave. We used three items (measured as continuous variables) to assess women's previous attempts to leave their abusive partner: (1) *How many times have you left your most recent abusive partner/relationship?* (2) *What is the longest period of time you have stayed in a shelter for abused women/transition home?* (measured in days) (3) *How many times have you refused to go to a shelter/transition home in the past because you could not bring your pets with you?*

Concern for pet. To assess the extent to which level of concern for pet's welfare deterred the survivor from leaving earlier we asked "*Did concern for the welfare of your pets keep you from leaving your partner sooner?*" Response options ranged from 0 (not at all) to 4 (definitely). To gauge the level of concern survivors have had for the welfare of pets since entering shelter, we asked "*How concerned have you been about your pets since you have been in this transition house/shelter?*" Response options ranged from 0 (unconcerned) to 4 (extremely concerned).

Decision to leave partner. Three items were included in the survey to assess the role of pets in women’s decision to leave their abusive partner. The first question, “*How likely do you think it is that you would have left your partner earlier if you could have brought your pets to the shelter/transition house with you?*”, was assessed via a five-point scale anchored by 0 (extremely unlikely) and 4 (extremely likely). The second question, “*How much of an impact do you think your abuser’s maltreatment of the pets had on your decision to leave your abuser?*”, was similarly assessed via a 5-point scale (0 = no impact at all to 4 = extremely strong). Finally, we asked “*Did your abuser’s maltreatment of pets increase your desire to leave?*”, with possible response options ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (much more).

Analysis

To assess differences between women who did not have pets while with their abusive partner (n = 31), women with pets who reported no to low levels of pet abuse (less than 4 items on the PTAS, with no items from the severe physical abuse subscale, n = 21), and women with pets who experienced high levels of pet abuse (4 or more items on the PTAS, and any item from the severe physical abuse subscale, n = 34), we first conducted a one way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) to evaluate women’s previous attempts to leave the abusive relationship.

For women who had pets while with their abusive partner (n = 55), we then conducted a series of hierarchal multivariate regression equations to assess the association between different forms of animal abuse and women’s help seeking, after controlling for the length of the abusive relationship and the severity of physical abuse experienced by the survivor. Block one of each equation contained the length of time of the relationship between the survivor and perpetrator,

block two contained the severity of physical abuse experienced by the respondent (as measured by the physical assault subscale of the CTS-2), and block three contained specific types of animal maltreatment perpetrated against the pet by the respondent's abuser (as measured by each PTAS subscale, with one subscale entered per regression equation). All responses of "don't know" were treated as missing data, and missing data was excluded from all analyses.

Results

Reports of animal maltreatment among the 55 women who had pets during their abusive relationships were common: approximately 89% reported perpetration of animal maltreatment by their partner. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the women with companion animals who reported having ever experienced each indicator of pet abuse in the PTAS. [Insert Table 2 here]

Forty women out of the 55 survivors who had pets while with their abusive partner still had them at the time they left their perpetrator (72.7%). Sixty percent indicated that their pets were currently still in the care of their abusive partner (n=24), 22.5% left their pets with friends or family members (n=9), and the remaining women reported that their pet was currently with them in shelter (n=2), or was being boarded at an animal shelter (n=3). Of women who ever had pets during their abusive relationship, 35.19% indicated that their partner abused their pet(s) and that the abuse escalated over time (only 0.07% reported it decreased over time).

Overall the sample reported relatively high levels of concern for their pets. Fifty six percent of the respondents indicated that concern for their pets kept them from leaving their abuser earlier. An additional 18% indicated that it factored into their decision making. Concern for their pets also continued once they were in shelter. Just over one third of the respondents

indicated that they were extremely concerned for their pets. An additional 26% reported that they were also concerned, although it did not rise to the level of extreme concern.

The majority of the sample also indicated that their pets factored into their decision to leave their abuser. Approximately 68% indicated that their abuser's mistreatment of their pet had a moderately strong, strong, or extremely strong impact on their decision to leave the abusive relationship. Further, approximately 29% indicated that the mistreatment of their pet made them much more interested in leaving their partner. When asked if they would have left their partner earlier if they could have brought their pets with them to shelter, approximately 47% of respondents indicated that it was likely or extremely likely that they would have.

We conducted one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to determine if there were significant differences between women with no pets, women with pets who had experienced no to low levels of animal abuse, and women with pets who experienced severe animal abuse in terms of the number of times women had previously left their most recent abusive relationship, where she stayed when she had left, or the longest amount of time she had ever stayed at a shelter or transition home for abused women. We found no statistically significant differences between these groups on those variables.

Previous Attempts to Leave and Pet Ownership

Subsequent to the ANOVA analysis, we conducted a series of hierarchal regression analyses with the sample of women who had ever owned a pet while with their abusive partner (see Table 3). After controlling for length of relationship and levels of physical abuse experienced by women, severe physical abuse of pets was found to be significantly associated with the number of times survivors had left their most recent abusive relationship ($t = 2.05, p \leq$

.01), in that as the level of severe physical abuse perpetrated against their pets increased, so too did the number of previous attempts women had made to leave the abusive relationship. None of the other forms of animal maltreatment were significantly related to any other measures of women's previous attempts to leave her partner. [Table 3 about here].

Concern for Pets

In regards to the likelihood that concern for the welfare of pets kept survivors from leaving their partners earlier, the length of the relationship with the abuser was a significant predictor in two of our models (see Table 3). When block three of our model contained threats to harm pets, the length of the relationship with the perpetrator was associated with a significant decrease in the likelihood that concern for pets prevented women from leaving the relationship sooner ($\beta = -1.60, p \leq .05$; Model $F = 3.84, p \leq .05$). When block three of our model contained severe physical abuse of pets, relationship length was similarly significantly associated with a decreased likelihood that concern for pets was a hindrance to leaving the relationship earlier ($\beta = -1.97, p \leq .01$; Model $F = 2.98, p \leq .05$). Neither level of physical abuse experienced by women nor pet abuse in and of itself significantly predicted the likelihood that concern for pet's welfare prevented women from leaving earlier in these models. In regards to the level of concern for pets since entering shelter, none of our predictive models reached the level of statistical significance.

Decision Making to Leave Partner

Two of our models significantly predicted the likelihood that women would have left their abusive relationships earlier had they been able to bring their pets to the shelter with them: the model containing length of relationship, physical abuse experienced by women, and emotional abuse of pet ($F = 3.40, p \leq .05$) and the model containing length of relationship,

physical abuse experienced by women, and threats to harm pets ($F = 3.53, p \leq .05$). In both of these models, physical abuse experienced by women was significantly associated with an increased likelihood that women would have left the abusive relationship earlier had they been able to house their pet in shelter with them ($\beta = .15, p \leq .05$ and $\beta = .18, p \leq .05$ respectively). The type of animal abuse experienced and the length of relationship with one's partner were not found to be significant predictors in these models.

In regards to the impact that the abuser's maltreatment of pets had on the survivor's decision to leave her abuser, all five of our models (containing each of the five subscales of the PTAS) were statistically significant. Emotional abuse of pets significantly increased the impact that pet abuse had on a woman's decision to leave ($\beta = .14, p \leq .001$), as did physical neglect of pets ($\beta = .16, p \leq .001$), and severe physical abuse of animals ($\beta = .29, p \leq .05$). Levels of physical abuse experienced by survivors was also found to be significantly associated with the impact that pet abuse had on survivor's choice to leave in three of our models. When block three of our model contained the PTAS threat to harm subscale, physical abuse experienced by women increased the impact that pet abuse had on her decision to leave ($\beta = .16, p \leq .05$). When block three of our model contained the PTAS physical neglect subscale, physical abuse experienced by women similarly increased the impact that pet abuse had on her decision to leave ($\beta = .13, p \leq .05$). The relationship between physical abuse experienced by women and an increased likelihood that pet abuse impacted her decision to leave was also found in our model containing the PTAS physical abuse subscale in block three ($\beta = .22, p \leq .01$).

Four of our models similarly predicted the likelihood that the abuser's maltreatment of pets increased women's desire to leave the relationship. Our models containing the emotional

abuse subscale of the PTAS ($f = 0.16, p \leq .001$; Model $F = 11.80, p \leq .001$), the threat to harm animals subscale ($f = .16, p \leq .01$; Model $F = 5.57, p \leq .01$), the physical neglect subscale ($f = 0.17, p \leq .001$; Model $F = 12.81, p \leq .001$), and the physical abuse subscale ($f = .14, p \leq .05$; Model $F = 7.29, p \leq .01$) were all found to be statistically significant. In all four of these models, higher scores on the PTAS subscale (indicative of higher levels of animal abuse) were significantly associated with an increased desire on the part of survivors to leave the relationship. Level of physical abuse experienced by women also significantly increased the desire of women to leave the relationship in our model containing threats to harm pets in block three and our model containing physical abuse of pets in block three ($f = .14, p \leq .05$ and $f = .15, p \leq .05$ respectively).

Discussion

These findings indicate that in this sample decision-making regarding leaving an abusive partner is significantly impacted by the perpetration of several types of animal maltreatment. Most specifically, emotional animal abuse, threats to harm the animal, animal neglect, and physical animal abuse significantly increase the desire to leave the relationship, above and beyond the impacts of the length of the relationship and the frequency of physical IPV experienced by the woman. Yet the specific type of animal maltreatment perpetrated appears less important in explaining whether a woman delayed leaving an abusive partner due to concern for her pet, whereas the length of the relationship and the physical IPV experienced by the woman become more important predictors.

Over two-thirds of our sample reported that their partner's maltreatment of their pet(s) had a moderately strong, strong, or extremely strong *impact* on their decision to leave their

abuser. This question was intentionally nondirectional: it did not ask if animal maltreatment increased or decreased the desire to leave, only if it impacted the decision-making process. When we disaggregated the forms of animal maltreatment in the regression models, all five of our models (each with a different subscale of the PTAS) predicting this outcome variable were significant. Emotional animal abuse, neglect, and severe physical animal abuse were significant individual predictors in these models, with severe physical animal abuse having the largest relative effect – approximately double that of emotional animal abuse and neglect. In some of these models, the physical IPV experienced by the woman herself was also a significant positive predictor.

Approximately 29% of our sample selected the highest value on the Likert scale given when asked how much the maltreatment of their pet by their partner *increased* their desire to leave him. Further, four of the five types of animal maltreatment we measured were associated with a significantly *increased* desire to leave the relationship, controlling for physical IPV and length of relationship. Neglect had a slightly higher effect on increasing the desire to leave, followed by emotional pet abuse and threats (both with the same effect), and physical pet abuse having a slightly weaker effect. Physical IPV was also a significant predictor in a couple of these models. These findings corroborate Strand and Faver's (2005) finding that some survivors (12% in their sample) report that pet maltreatment provides motivation for leaving an abuser. The fact that animal maltreatment can increase the desire to leave an abusive partner has not been discussed much in the literature; instead the vast majority of the literature has been focused on animal abuse as it relates to delays in leaving abusive relationships (see Ascione et. al.'s 2007 review of the literature).

We also included questions regarding delaying leaving due to concern for pets to assess that aspect of the relationship between pets and help-seeking. Fifty six percent of our sample reported that they *delayed leaving* their partner due to concern for their pet, but the specific types of animal abuse perpetrated were not significant predictors of delayed leaving. Here the length of the relationship became important: four of the models are significant, and in three of them the length of relationship has a significant negative effect on delayed leaving (and in the other two models the relationship was in the same direction). Thus, in our sample at least, it is not as much the specific type of animal maltreatment that predicts delaying leaving due to concern for the pet as it is the length of the relationship, where the length of time in the relationship is associated with a significant *decrease* in the likelihood that concern for the pets kept them from leaving the relationship earlier. It is possible that as relationships go on longer and become more entrenched, and perhaps come to include children, other factors in addition to concern for the pet are more likely to figure into the decision to leave. Further research is needed to determine what other factors might be related to delaying leaving an abusive partner due to concern for one's pet's safety in addition to the length of time in the relationship. In particular, we would suggest specifically examining the role that having dependent children might play and whether the respondents had family/friends who could care for their pets while they were in shelter or if they were aware of programs to do so. Although we did collect this information in our study, we did not have the sample size necessary to include them as predictors in our models.

We asked a second question to tap into the possibility of delayed leaving due to pets, specifically if it was likely that the respondent would have left her abuser earlier if she could have brought her pets to the shelter with her: approximately 47% of respondents indicated that it

was likely or extremely likely that they would have left earlier if they could have brought their pets. Two of the models (one with emotional pet abuse and the other with threats against pets) were significant, and in each physical IPV was the only significant individual predictor. Thus, the frequency of physical IPV in some instances is associated with an increased likelihood that the woman would have left earlier if she could have brought her pet with her to the shelter. This points to a serious safety concern as it indicates that women who experience more frequent physical IPV are more likely to report that they would have left their abuser earlier if they could have brought their pets to shelter with them.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the help-seeking literature describes survivors' decision making as a rational choice process where the benefits of leaving are weighed against the costs (e.g., Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, and Weintraub 2005; Thomas, Goodman, & Putnins, 2015; Stork, 2008), and Thomas and colleagues (2015) have noted that feelings of loss are identified by survivors as the most significant cost to leaving an abusive relationship. This feeling of loss is often tied to having to leave things behind, particularly if going to a shelter, and may outweigh the perceived cost of IPV, even physical IPV. Combining insights from this literature with the literature also reviewed herein that documents the close connection that abuse victims can have with their pets, it is evident that having to separate from a beloved pet when going to shelter would constitute a loss significant enough to pose a very real barrier to leaving for some women. In short, abused women with pets are in a bind. On the one hand, it is likely that their abuser is also mistreating their pets, or is threatening to, and this can increase their desire to leave the relationship. Yet on the other hand, having a pet can pose a barrier to leaving an abusive relationship because most shelters do not allow them and alternative arrangements for

pet caretaking are often hard to come by, which is no doubt why the majority of our sample reported delaying leaving their abuser and then left their pet behind with their abuser once they finally did flee to safety.

Severe physical animal abuse was the only variable significantly associated with the number of times the survivor had left the most recent abusive relationship in the past. Controlling for the length of the relationship and physical IPV perpetrated against the respondent, a one-unit increase in the severe physical animal abuse scale (which has a minimum possible value of 0 and a maximum of 16) is associated with an increase of slightly more than two additional times that the survivor has left her abuser prior to this most recent time. Because we controlled for the length of time of the relationship and physical IPV, this finding cannot be explained by the possibility that these women had been in relationships longer and therefore had a greater time frame for leaving or that they were motivated to leave because of the physical abuse against them. This significant relationship may be related to the finding that animal maltreatment by an abuser can be a powerful motivating factor in deciding to leave a relationship, although we cannot rule out the possibility that this finding is connected to other variables that we simply did not have the sample size necessary to control for (e.g., multiple types of IPV, presence of children).

Contrary to our expectations, none of our models were significant in predicting the number of times women had refused to go to shelter in the past because they could not take pets with them. This finding is not necessarily surprising though given that we are asking a sample of women who had left their abusers this question: these are women who by virtue of where they are have demonstrated a willingness to leave. This question might be more usefully directed at a

sample of women from the general population, although we acknowledge that gathering data on the intersection of animal abuse and IPV from the general population poses its own challenges.

Additionally, none of our models significantly predicted the level of concern for pets since entering the shelter. Just over one third of the respondents indicated that they were extremely concerned for their pets. Yet the type of animal maltreatment, relationship length, and physical IPV were not significant predictors of this concern. Again, the help-seeking literature is useful in contextualizing this finding. The detrimental sense of loss that Thomas et al. (2015) found among abused women in their study may be particularly profound when pets are involved, and this might contribute to a generalized sense of concern regarding the loss of this relationship that is not related to the type and degree of mistreatment the pet was subjected to in the past or even whether the pet was left with the partner or elsewhere.

The help-seeking literature is also careful to distinguish between informal (e.g. disclosure to family and friends) and formal help-seeking (e.g., reporting to police, entering a shelter, seeking professional counseling services) (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Kaukinen, 2002; Hyman et al., 2006; Meyer, 2010; Shannon, Logan, Cole & Medley, 2006). We acknowledge that in addition to the previously mentioned limitations of this study, its focus is limited to formal help-seeking; future research might explore the role pets play in informal help-seeking among abused women. This study was also limited by an inability to control for socio-demographic factors in our models, other potential covariates, including abuser characteristics (due to limited statistical power to include additional variables). In particular, we would recommend further research with larger, more diverse samples, particularly along the dimensions of race and sexuality.

Conclusion

The literature is now replete with studies indicating that pets in homes where there is abuse are at significant risk of maltreatment. A few of these studies indicate that the presence of pets and their maltreatment can impact the decision making and help seeking behavior of survivors of IPV. This study begins to tease apart this impact and demonstrates that specific types of animal maltreatment (emotional, threats to harm, neglect, and physical animal abuse) significantly increase the desire to leave an abusive partner, even when controlling for relationship length and physical abuse suffered by the human survivor, thus pointing to the unique effects of animal maltreatment and the importance of moving beyond the focus on physical animal abuse that tends to prevail in the literature.

The specific type of animal maltreatment is apparently less important in predicting the degree to which animal maltreatment kept a woman in an abusive relationship longer than she thinks she otherwise would have been. Concern for pets in this context appears more generalized than specific to a certain form of abuse. Notably, however, in some of our models the physical abuse of the woman herself is associated with an increase in the likelihood that she would have left her abuser earlier if she could have brought her pet to shelter with her. This runs counter to what is likely the prevailing expectation that a woman would be less likely to delay leaving an abuser because she cannot bring her pet with her if she is being exposed to frequent physical IPV. It also points to a serious problem that extends beyond the animals being victimized in this context to the human victims of IPV and the shelters that are trying to protect them: those women who are at greatest risk of physical harm and who shelters would most like to reach out to may be most reluctant to leave because they cannot bring their pets with them.

Caman and colleagues (2017) note that in western developed countries, the incidence of severe IPV against women has remained at approximately the same level in spite of the amount of resources made available to survivors seeking to leave their abusers. They write, "Undoubtedly, these efforts are essential for victimized women, however, these tendencies putatively highlight the need for novel approaches in combating gender-based violence" (p. 19). Based on our findings in this study, we recommend implementing policies and programs that make it easier for women with pets to leave abusive partners and make it more difficult for abusers to use pets as leverage to get their victims to return to them. In short, sheltering pets on the grounds of shelters for IPV survivors is exactly the type of novel approach that is now warranted.

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Table 1. *Sample Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Intimate Partner Violence Survivors*

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	IPV survivors who reported data on pet ownership (n=86)	IPV survivors who owned a pet while with their abusive partner (n=55)
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
European Ancestry (white)	62.8%	74.5%
Black	4.7%	0%
First Nations or Metis	18.6%	14.6%
Arab	7.0%	5.5%
South Asian	1.2%	1.8%
Latin American	2.3%	1.8%
Mixed Racial-Ethnic Heritage	3.5%	1.8%
<i>Sexuality</i>		
Heterosexual	85.9%	85.5%
Bi-sexual	3.5%	5.5%
Lesbian	1.2%	0%
Asexual	3.5%	3.6%
Other (unspecified)	5.9%	5.5%
<i>Highest Level of Education Attained</i>		
Less than high school or some high school	20.9%	25.4%
High school graduate or equivalent	19.8%	14.5%
Some post-secondary education	51.2%	52.8%
University graduate or above	8.1%	7.3%

<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single (never legally married)	33.7%	30.9%
Legally married or common law partnership	18.6%	21.8%
Separated but still legally married or common-law	43.6%	43.6%
Divorced	1.8%	1.8%
Widowed	1.8%	1.8%
<i>Limited in Activities due to Disability or Health Issue</i>	41.2%	42.6%
<i>Age</i>	37.9 (<i>SD</i> = 10.89)	40.5 (<i>SD</i> =10.99)
<i>Children with abuser</i> (range: 0 to 6)	1.2 (<i>SD</i> = 1.44)	1.4 (<i>SD</i> =1.66)
<i>Children with someone other than abuser</i> (range: 0 to 4)	1.2 (<i>SD</i> = 1.50)	1.2 (<i>SD</i> =1.42)
<i>Number of Times Left Most Recent Abusive Partner</i>	2.94 (<i>SD</i> =2.86)	2.86 (<i>SD</i> =2.94)

Table 2 *Summary of Types of Animal Maltreatment Experienced by Women who Owned Animal Companions During Their Abusive Relationship* (n = 55)

Item on Partner’s Treatment of Animals Scale (PTAS)	Percentage
<i>Emotional Abuse of Animal</i>	64.2%
Left a pet outside longer than I thought safe	35.9%
Confined a pet in an inappropriately small space for an extended period of time	37.7%
Put pet in a dangerous situation	33.9%
Chased pet with the intent of harm but did not catch the pet	45.2%
Intimidated or scared a pet on purpose	62.6%
<i>Threats to Harm Animal</i>	71.2%
Threatened to get rid of a pet	66.6%
Threatened to harm a pet	47.3%
Threatened to harm other animals (pets of neighbors or family members)	36.4%
Threatened to harm or get rid of a pet to get me to do something	30.9%
<i>Physical Neglect of Animal</i>	48.1%

Refused to feed a pet	41.8%
Refused to provide water for a pet	38.9%
Refused to provide pet with medicine for an ongoing health condition	27.8%
<i>Physical Abuse of Animal</i>	69.8%
Smacked a pet	57.4%
Kicked a pet	43.4%
Forced a pet to fight with another animal	5.5%
Threw an object at a pet	51.9%
Hit a pet with an object	37.0%
<i>Severe Physical Abuse of Animal</i>	25.0%
Broke a pet's bones	11.3%
Drowned a pet	9.3%
Injured a pet	20.8%
Killed a pet	14.8%

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Models Predicting Women's Previous Attempts to Leave, Concern for Pets, and Decision's to Leave

		Women's Previous Attempts to Leave			Women's Concern for Pet		Women's Decisions to Leave		
		# of Times Left Abusive Partner	Longest Period Stayed at a Shelter	# of Times Refused to Go to Shelter Because Could Not Bring Pet	Concern for Pet Since Entering Shelter	Concern for Pet Kept From Leaving Earlier	Would have Left Earlier if Could Have Brought Pets to Shelter	Impact Maltreatment of Pets Had on Decision to Leave Abuser	Extent Maltreatment of Pets Increased Desire to Leave
Model 1	<i>Relationship Length</i>	1.03	3.18	-.67	.19	-1.21	-.45	.72	.44
	<i>Physical IPV</i>	.24	3.76*	.08	-.03	.09	.15*	.10	.0.10
	<i>Emotional Pet Abuse</i>	.03	-.49	-.03	.08	.07	.06	.14***	.16***
	Model F Stat	1.27	2.15	1.98	.97	5.05**	3.40*	8.67***	11.80** *
Model 2	<i>Relationship Length</i>	1.23	4.55	-.56	.16	-1.60*	-.52	.47	.11
	<i>Physical IPV</i>	.24	3.48*	.07	.00	.14	.18*	.16*	.14*
	<i>Threats to Harm Pet</i>	.11	-.31	-.03	.16	-.00	.06	.13	.16**
	Model F Stat	1.68	1.87	1.66	.86	3.84*	3.53*	3.45*	5.57**
Model 3	<i>Relationship Length</i>	.66	-.03	-.66	.63	-1.30	-.38	.77	-.02
	<i>Physical IPV</i>	.27	4.15*	.09	-.05	.07	.12	.13*	.12
	<i>Neglect of Pet</i>	.06	-.42	-.04	.07	.07	.07	.16***	.17***
	Model F Stat	1.14	2.20	2.09	.79	2.53	1.92	10.15*** *	12.81** *
Model 0	<i>Relationship Length</i>	2.04	-2.98	-.01	-.01	-1.92*	-.87	1.30	.90

d el 4	<i>Physical IPV</i>	.19	3.72*	.02	.04	.17	.24*	.22**	.15*
	<i>Physical Pet Abuse</i>	.18	-1.19	.00	.01	-.08	-.05	.08	.14*
	Model F Stat	1.80	1.70	.20	.11	2.76	2.62	6.00**	7.29**
M o d el 5	<i>Relationship Length</i>	.07	2.67	-.59	.55	-1.97**	-.11	-.22	-.60
	<i>Physical IPV</i>	.09	4.28*	.11*	.00	.09	.16	.09	.08
	<i>Severe Pet Abuse</i>	2.05**	-1.92	-.11	-.13	.06	.09	.29*	.27
	Model F Stat	5.31**	2.06	2.37	.37	2.98*	1.96	3.37*	2.56

Note: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$