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# Cruelty toward Cats: Changing Perspectives

## 2 CHAPTER

Randall Lockwood

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**O**f all the species that have been domesticated, cats have historically been subjected to the widest diversity of treatment by humans. They have been worshipped as gods and reviled as devils, coddled and pampered, but also abandoned and abused. Our treatment of cats has likewise created a range of problems for professionals concerned with their care—from dealing with problems of obesity and overindulgence to tending to the needs of animals who have been neglected, intentionally harmed, or even tortured.

## A Brief History of Kindness and Cruelty to Cats

Most authorities consider the cat to be among the most recent animals to be domesticated, with its origins in Egypt (Zeuner 1963; Clutton-Brock 1993). There are no remains of cats from prehistoric Egypt or the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 B.C.). Pictorial representations of cats that are clearly domesticated appear at the time of the fifth dynasty (c. 2600 B.C.), and from the New Kingdom onward

(from 1567 B.C.), paintings and statues of cats became increasingly common in Egypt (Beadle 1977).

Recently, remains of a cat found buried in association with a human at a site in Cyprus were dated to approximately 7500 B.C. The rich offerings found in the grave suggested that the person had special social status and a special relationship with the animal. This find could constitute the earliest evidence of taming of the cat (Vigne et al. 2004).

Serpell (1988) notes that the role of cats in the Egyptian pantheon was complex and confusing. Male cats were associated with the sun god Ra. Cats and lionesses were also linked to the warlike goddess Sekmet. The primary association was with the cat goddess Bastet, a symbol of fertility, fecundity, and motherhood who was also associated with the moon and menstrual cycles. The prominence of cat cults did not develop until the twenty-second dynasty (c. 950 B.C.), when the capital became Bubastis, home of the cult of Bastet, and the local cat goddess became the official deity of the kingdom. The modern view of reverence for cats in Egypt comes almost entirely from the writings

of Herodotus, about 450 B.C. He describes his visit to the temples in Bubastis and the various practices surrounding the cult, including the harsh penalties for injuring or killing cats (Clutton-Brock 1993, 36): “When a man has killed one of the sacred animals if he did it with malice prepense, he is punished with death, if unwittingly, he has to pay such a fine as the priests choose to impose.”

Later in the same volume, Herodotus details the reverence with which deceased cats are embalmed and entombed. Archeologists in the nineteenth century recovered mummified remains of hundreds of thousands of cats from this period. Ironically, it is this collection of remains that provides the first evidence of what might be considered “ritualistic abuse” of cats.

Clutton-Brock (1993) describes findings from the radiological study of fifty-five wrapped cat mummies collected by egyptologist Flinders Petrie in 1907. She notes that “contrary to the general belief that ancient Egyptians never killed their cats, many of these had ‘broken necks.’ This could be seen in the x-rays as markedly displaced vertebrae in the neck” (38).

She notes that the mummies fell into two groups. Twenty were kittens one to four months old when they died or were killed, and seventeen were nine to seventeen months old. Only two were more than two years old. She suggests that the cats were being specially bred to be mummified by the priests for sale as votive offerings, which could explain what appears to have been a mass market in mummified cats. (This market was not without a hint of fraud. Some cat mummies from other sources appear to have been faked by wrapping a cat skull mounted atop fragments of human tibia and fibula.)

The export of cats from Egypt was illegal, so the domestic cat's introduction into Europe and Asia did not begin until several hundred years after the peak period of the cult of Bastet, finally becoming widespread by the tenth century (Zeuner 1963). The spread of Christianity brought with it what Serpell (1986, 155) describes as "extreme ruthlessness in suppressing unorthodox beliefs and in extirpating all traces of earlier pre-Christian religions." Since cats were often central to many of these belief systems, from the cult of Bastet to the worship of the Norse goddess Freya, they became a convenient target for the demonization of all things non-Christian and the focus of myriad forms of abuse intended to drive out and destroy the Devil. Cats also were transformed from a symbol of grace, fertility, and maternal care to one of bewitching sexuality and lasciviousness—an association that continues to affect public interpretation and behavior and serve as a justification for continuing abuse.

In the thirteenth century, Pope Gregory IX (ruling 1227–1241) issued a statement that Cathars, breakaway Christians, were known to be breeding black cats, who were the devil in disguise. In 1489 Pope Innocent VIII issued an official order to persecute all witches and kill all cats within Christian lands.

Similarly, Inquisitor Nicholas Remy, in his 1595 *Daemonolatreiae libri tres*, announced that all cats were demons (Conway 1998).

Darnton (1984) details a variety of forms of widespread institutionalized cat abuse common from the Middle Ages well into the late eighteenth century. Carnival celebrations of deviance came to an end on Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, when a live cat was incorporated into a straw mannequin, King of Carnival, and given a ritual trial and execution. In Burgundy young men passed around a cat, tearing its fur to make it scream as a form of "rough music." For the cycle of Saint John the Baptist, coinciding with the summer solstice, cats were tied up in bags, suspended from ropes, or burned at the stake. He further notes:

Parisians liked to incinerate cats by the sackful, while the Courimauds (cour a miaud or cat chasers) of Saint Chamond preferred to chase a flaming cat through the streets. In parts of Burgundy and Lorraine they danced around a kind of burning May pole with a cat tied to it. In the Metz region they burned a dozen cats at a time in a basket on top of a bonfire. The ceremony took place with great pomp in Metz itself, until it was abolished in 1765. (83)

One of the best documented instances of cruelty to cats was the "Great Cat Massacre" of the Rue Saint-Severin, Paris, which took place in the late 1730s (Darnton 1984; Twitchell 1989). The story was obtained from an account by Nicolas Contat, a worker who had witnessed the event. Several young male printer's apprentices systematically slaughtered all the neighborhood cats, starting with a favorite pet of their master's wife. According to Twitchell:

In fits of laughter they gleefully bashed the heads of cats, snapped the spines of cats,

squashed the bodies of cats, twisted cats at the midsection, and suffocated cats. They even improvised a gallows and hung cats by the neck. (1989, 48)

The events were replayed in pantomime many times during the weeks that followed. Darnton puts these events in the context of the social upheaval of the times. Printer's apprentices were among the most exploited workers of the time, while a passion for pet cats was growing among the bourgeois, particularly the masters of the printing trade. Portraits were painted of pampered cats who were fed choice fowl, while the boys in the print shops labored with little hope of promotion to the ranks of journeymen. Cat abuse was already well established in the culture of the time, thus cats were an easy and seemingly appropriate target for this outrage.

Such abuse was also commonplace in England as well. The owners of cats were often suspected of "wickedness" and were killed, along with their cats, under the Witchcraft Act of 1563 (Young 2001). The first person to be tried under this law was Agnes Waterhouse, who was executed in 1566 for owning a cat unfortunately named "Sathan" (Durstun 2000).

More conventional abuse of cats at the hands of young offenders flourished in eighteenth-century England. The first illustration in William Hogarth's classic series of woodcuts "The Four Stages of Cruelty" depicts a 1750s street scene in which young boys are tormenting a variety of animals in many ways. Cats are the most abundant victims in this illustration. They are seen being thrown out of windows, hung by their tails from a pole, and set upon by fighting dogs. Hogarth was an astute observer of both animal and human behavior, and it is likely that this illustration was a composite of instances he had witnessed personally. He made these illustrations

[I]n hopes of preventing [to] some degree the cruel treatment of poor Animals which makes the streets of London more disagreeable to the human mind, than anything what ever, the very describing of which gives pain.” (Uglow 1997, 500)

Cats did not fare much better in the scientific views of the mid-eighteenth century. The most influential naturalist of the time was Buffon, author of the multivolume *Histoire naturelle* (1749–1788). Kete (1994) notes that, quite simply, “Buffon hated cats,” describing them as having a perverse nature and worthy of being kept only to control rodents as “the lesser of two evils.”

Conditions seemed to improve for cats in the mid-nineteenth century. In the United Kingdom, cats were not afforded protection under anti-cruelty laws until the 1835 revisions of the 1822 animal welfare legislation protecting livestock, which extended the protections to domestic pets and prohibited bull baiting and cock-fighting (Ritvo 1987). The *Annual Report* of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) detailed the animal-cruelty cases investigated and prosecuted under these laws. The majority of cases continued to involve maltreatment of livestock and draft animals, but proponents of companion animal welfare recognized the growing concern about the abuse of dogs and cats. From 1857 to 1860, dogs and cats accounted for only 2 percent of the cruelty convictions, although 13 percent of the RSPCA's reports to the public focused on dog and cat cruelty cases.

In France, the first success of the emerging animal protection movement was the Grammont Law of 1850, prohibiting public abuse of animals. Grammont, a retired cavalry officer, promoted the legislation in part on the basis that “the

spectacle of suffering encourages cruelty....The child accustomed to bloody pastimes or witnessing cruelty will become a dangerous man” (Kete 1994, 5). Such views represented, in part, a continuing concern about the issues raised by the Great Cat Massacre more than a century earlier.

The historical ambivalence of many cultures toward cats continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the 1980s cats became the most abundant species (excluding aquarium fish) in American homes, a trend that has continued (AVMA 2002; APPMA 2004). The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA) estimates that there are 77.6 million owned cats in the United States, compared to 65 million owned dogs. Although there are more dog-owning homes (40.6 million) than cat-owning homes (35.4 million), there are more cats in the average cat-owning family (average 2.2, compared with 1.6 dogs per dog-owning household). Despite this popularity, cats have not achieved equal status with dogs as true companion animals. The size of feral cat populations is impossible to determine accurately, but it may approach the number of owned cats (Holton and Manzoor 1993; Slater 2002).

Despite the popularity and proliferation of resources on cat care, there is also a continuing stream of material promoting, or at least making light of, cat abuse. This has no parallel in the canine world. Popular books include *The Cat Hater's Handbook or the Ailurophobe's Delight* (1963), *The Official I Hate Cats Book* (1980), *101 Uses for a Dead Cat* (1981), with several sequels, *How to Kill Your Girlfriend's Cat* (1988), and *Cat-Dependent No More!* (1991). Recently there has been a proliferation of video and on-line games allowing simulated cat-killing, such as “Cat Hunter,” “Clay Kitten Shooting,” and “Cat Blaster,” and

other representations in popular culture, including an unaired but widely distributed car commercial making light of the decapitation of a cat by a closing sunroof. A significant proportion of the population continues to express active antipathy toward cats. Kellert and Berry (1980) found that 17.4 percent of people surveyed expressed some dislike of cats, compared with only 2.6 percent who specifically disliked dogs. Holland comments on this discrepancy and associates the differences in American attitudes toward dogs and cats with a degree of xenophobia:

People who hate cats tend to be proud of that fact, and brag about it as if it proved something honest and straightforward in their natures. Nobody brags about hating dogs. To hate dogs would be mean-spirited and peculiarly unpatriotic; dogs are a very American concept, fraternal, hearty and unpretentious, while cats are inscrutable like the wily oriental and elitist like the European esthete. (1988, 34)

## The Psychology and Biology of Cat Abuse

What is it about cats that elicits such paradoxical views? In addition to the long-standing social and cultural factors discussed above that have promoted abuse of cats, certain elements of the animals' biology and ethology have allowed or encouraged their maltreatment.

### Sexual and Social Behavior

Cats were associated with femininity, fertility, and sensuality in ancient religions for good reason. Female cats are induced ovulators and are highly promiscuous, inviting the attention and competition of several males, indeed, courting

up to twenty males during a single estrus period (Natoli and DeVito 1988). This is an effective reproductive strategy for a solitary hunter who must insure that males contributing to the gene pool of her offspring are capable of repelling their rivals. Many cultures have equated promiscuous sexuality with cats, as seen in slang. As early as 1401 men were warned of chasing “cattis tailis,” for example, prostitutes, giving rise to “tail” as slang. Other phrases echoing feline sexuality (“cat house,” “pussy”) have been in use since before the seventeenth century (Morris 1986).

In addition to being perceived as highly sexual creatures, female cats are frequently aggressive toward their recent mates. As with many solitary hunters, following mating, males are potential competitors for food and may be a threat to kittens, so the females often attack them or drive them off. Individually, cats of both sexes can at one moment exhibit a warm, soft, cuddly demeanor and at the next indicate that they have had sufficient contact by terminating an interaction with a serious bite or scratch. This is often in stark contrast to dogs, who will solicit attention and often continue to invite interaction submissively even when maltreated.

The social independence and resistance to training of most cats, along with their “coy” sensuality, can present a special challenge or threat to those needing to gain a sense of power and control over others as well as over the uncontrollable changes occurring in their own bodies, that is, adolescent boys. It is not surprising that both historically and epidemiologically, the principal abusers of cats have been young males, particularly those seeking to assert their authority. As noted by Serpell (1986, 156), there is “an element of misogyny embedded in this hatred of cats.” He further observes

(156) “The unmitigated cruelty cats have received...doubtless speaks volumes about the sexual insecurities of European males.”

## Resilience

Despite their relatively small size and fragility, cats have a reputation as survivors, perhaps due in part to the speed, agility, quick reflexes, and other adaptations that allow them to survive situations that would be likely to kill a human or dog. Most intriguing have been reports of “high-rise injuries” sustained in falls from tall buildings (Robinson 1976; Whitney and Mehlhaff 1987). One interesting aspect of high-rise injuries in cats is the effect of the distance fallen on the frequency and severity of injuries. The rate of injury is linear up to a fallen distance of approximately seven stories; above this height, injury rates do not increase, and fracture rates decrease, in part because cats falling from greater heights have time to orient themselves to better absorb impact. A cat who free-fell from thirty-two stories onto concrete, the subject of one of the published reports, suffered only mild pneumothorax and a chipped tooth and was released after forty-eight hours of observation.

Although this kind of resilience may have contributed to the perception of the “invulnerability” of cats, Tabor (1983) attributes the specific notion that cats have “nine lives” to distortions of a statement c. 1560 by Baldwin in *Beware the Cat*, who wrote, “it was permitted for a witch to take her cattes body nine times.” At the same time, this resilience is to blame for a great deal of feline suffering. Morris (1986, 6) notes, “Because cats can survive when thrown out and abandoned, it makes it easier for people to do just that.”

## Predatory Behavior

While the hunting behavior of dogs generally is perceived as something that is useful to humans—as a prac-

tical partnership in the pursuit of game—the predatory behavior of cats is often perceived as being “selfish” and unnecessarily cruel. The “game of cat and mouse” has become synonymous with action that is sneaky, malicious, and underhanded. Cats, particularly females with recently weaned kittens, will often wound or maul their prey without killing it quickly, in part as a way of providing the young with disabled prey on which to practice their predatory skills (Turner and Meister 1988). By human standards this adaptation, which potentially prolongs the suffering of the cat’s prey, can appear to be cruel, sadistic, and “amoral,” and thus, to some, it may seem to justify similar maltreatment of cats, who are often portrayed as enjoying inflicting torment on their victims.

Since many cats that are allowed to hunt will bring dead or maimed prey home to their human “families,” the consequences of cat predation can often be obvious and can fuel strong emotional responses against cats. The Mammal Society in the United Kingdom (2001) released a report based on a review of prey killed or captured by 964 owned cats during a five-month period in 1997. The report documented more than 14,000 prey collected by cat owners from their animals. Highly controversial extrapolations to the entire British cat population led to the assertion that “domestic moggies could be killing 275 million creatures a year” in England (BBC 2001). Hartwell (2004) offers a detailed critique of the report and provides details of some of the alarmist reports and anti-cat backlash that followed its release, including a call from a renowned wildlife photographer that cats should be shot.

Patronek (1998) reviewed numerous studies to evaluate the potential impact of free-roaming and feral cats on humans and wild animals. He noted that few studies indicate any long-term effects on songbird or

wildlife populations, and many provide evidence to the contrary. This report suggested that humane agencies should continue to urge people to keep cats indoors for their safety and for the safety of potential prey, but they should not see predation as a significant concern in assessing the feasibility of trap-test-vaccinate-neuter-and-release (TTVAR) programs to control feral cats (see Slater and Shain, this volume).

A report released by Defenders of Wildlife (King and Rappole 2003) also questioned the significance of the impact cats have on songbirds, based on review of the North American Breeding Bird Survey and thirty-six other long-term surveys of migratory bird populations. This review notes: “windows, cats, West Nile virus, wind turbines—all those specific causes of death that are apparent in people’s backyards—are not, at present, having any known effect on the population size of any continental bird species” (Yakutchik 2003, n.p.). Habitat destruction in both winter and summer habitats of these species was considered a much greater threat to bird populations.

### **Nocturnal Behavior**

Creatures of the night have always been viewed with suspicion and are often equated with occult forces. Nocturnal habits, coupled with the unusual “eyeshine” produced by the reflective tapetum of the cat’s eye, helped promote the perception of cats as something alien and suspicious. Such habits, along with the stealth required of a solitary hunter, only reinforce the perception of cats as “occult” (literally “hidden”) animals.

### **Vocalizations**

Darnton (1984) notes that the cries of cats subjected to pain or torture have a human-like tone that contributed to the impression that an anthropomorphic demon was being destroyed or driven out when they were tormented during the rituals that were so common in earli-

er centuries. Many of the common abuses in this era seemed designed to elicit such cries from cats, reaching their nadir in the form of “cat organs,” musical instruments designed to produce different tones through tormenting cats of different sizes (Barloy 1974).

The “caterwauling” associated with female cats in heat, and the combat between the males they attract, is often used to justify various forms of abuse. The image of a rock or shoe thrown at noisy cats perched on a fence has become a cliché in cartoons and other depictions of cats.

## **Psychopathology/ Criminology of Cat Abuse**

As noted above, cruelty to animals in general has long been associated with an increased risk for involvement in criminal and antisocial behavior (Lockwood and Ascione 1998; Ascione and Arkow 1999; Ascione and Lockwood 2001; Merz-Perez and Heide 2003). Cruelty to cats has been associated specifically with future tendencies toward violence in a number of quantitative and anecdotal accounts. Felthous (1980) reviewed eighteen cases of men admitted to an inpatient psychiatric service who presented a history of repeatedly injuring dogs or cats. These were compared with a group of assaultive patients who did not have a history of animal cruelty. All but one member of the animal abuse group had tortured cats. This group also skewed toward higher levels of reported aggressiveness to people. Over 60 percent of these subjects reported childhood histories that included brutal punishments by father and mother, frequent childhood fights, and school truancy.

Felthous (1984) provides case histories of violent crimes involving prior acts of cruelty to animals, including one in which a man shot

his cat, believing the animal to be gaining control of him, several days before shooting his wife.

Building on these earlier surveys, Felthous and Kellert (1987) provided a systematic review of the choice of animals for abuse based on interviews with 84 prisoners in two penitentiaries. The greatest variety of cruelties had been inflicted on cats (thirty-three different forms of abuse were described), and most subjects who had abused cats used several different methods. Cats were the most frequent targets across all forms of abuse and were the predominant victims in cases involving burning, breaking of bones, or being thrown from a height (Table 1).

They conclude:

Physical features of cats render them suitable for some specific methods of abuse. Cats have long flexible tails that can be joined together. Fur burns. Their bones are easily broken. Cats are small enough to be carried about and dropped from heights. (231)

They note that these qualities are not unique to cats and suggest that cultural patterns and the sexual symbolism contribute to this selection of cats for abuse by violent offenders. They further note:

Although none of the subjects identified cats as symbolic of evil women, a “bad mother,” or the female genitalia, the possibility of consciously or unconsciously associating cats with women ought to be considered in aggressive men whose sexual and aggressive impulses may be fused at a primitive level, poorly differentiated and poorly modulated. (232)

This view echoes that of Revitch (1965), who suggested that cat abuse was associated with sexually motivated murders of women. This was clearly true in the case of serial murderer Keith Jespersion, who was convicted of three murders but who claimed responsibility for more

**Table 1**  
**Self-Reported Patterns of Animal Abuse**  
**by Incarcerated Prisoners, by Percentage**

Form of Animal Abuse	Reports Involving Dogs	Reports Involving Cats	Reports Involving Other Species
Burning	—	33.3	66.7
Shooting	21.4	7.1	71.4
Breaking Bones	16.7	50.0	33.3
Throwing from Height	30.0	70.0	—
Beating/Stoning	34.5	27.6	37.9
All Abuses	22.5	27.5	50.0

Adapted from Felthous and Kellert (1987)

than one hundred killings, many of which involved prostitutes as victims. In interviews with Jespersen conducted by the author and Jespersen's biographer (Olsen 2002), he has drawn a direct connection from the sense of empowerment he got from childhood killings of animals, usually cats, to the feelings that fueled his murders.

In the trial of Washington, D.C.-area sniper Lee Boyd Malvo, defense psychiatrist Neil Blumberg argued that Malvo's teen history of cat-killing meant that he was "unable to distinguish between right and wrong and was unable to resist the impulse" to commit the sniper killings (Associated Press 2003). Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) psychologists who reviewed Malvo's history in detail suggested that his pattern of stalking and shooting cats from a distance was consistent with his actions in his later crimes and served, in some ways, as a rehearsal for those actions (personal communication, FBI Special Agent A. Brantley, June 25, 2004).

It is clear from these and other accounts that the selection of cats as the object of abuse is more than just a result of their availability. Their physical, behavioral, and symbolic attributes often make

them the target of choice for those who are or who are destined to become perpetrators of violence against people. This makes detecting, reporting, and responding to acts of cruelty against cats an even more pressing concern.

## A Victimological Analysis of Cat and Dog Cruelty

To better understand the nature of cat cruelty cases, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) undertook a detailed review of the largest possible sample of such reports. The HSUS receives daily media clips from Cyberalert®, a service tracking more than 13,000 newspapers, magazines, journals, wire services, TV networks, and local TV stations. These clips are drawn from coverage of stories with any mention of animal abuse, cruelty, or neglect. The reports are then reviewed, and data on the specifics of each case are entered into a Microsoft Access® database. The data recorded for each case include offender age and gender, number and species of victims, details of the action against the animal, co-occurrence of other crimes, charges filed, and case outcome. When there are

multiple reports on a case that is covered over a long period (e.g., from the original report of the incident through the prosecution and outcome), all the available information is merged into a single case record. The database is then converted into SPSS® format for more detailed statistical analysis.

For this analysis we reviewed records of reports on 4,695 cases of animal cruelty reported between January 2000 and May 2004. These cases involved 5,225 alleged offenders. Despite the higher incidence of cats in the companion animal population, they were under-represented in these reports of cruelty. Of these cases, 51.8 percent reportedly involved dogs, 15.1 percent involved cats, 3.7 percent involved both cats and dogs, 3.7 percent involved cats and dogs and one or more other species, and 25.7 percent involved other species only—usually horses, livestock, fighting cocks, and wildlife.

## Cruelty to Cats vs. Cruelty to Dogs

Cases were broadly categorized as featuring "intentional cruelty" (e.g., traumatic physical injury), "neglect" (including malnourishment, abandonment, and starvation), or "collecting or hoarding" (i.e., maintaining large numbers of animals in unsanitary conditions without commercial intent, as defined by Patronek [1999]). Overall, 62.7 percent of the cases were characterized as "intentional." This was significantly higher for cats (69.0 percent) than for dogs (60.8 percent, chi-square = 15.43,  $p < .001$ ). Animals were killed in 47.4 percent of all cases involving cats or dogs. Cats were killed in significantly more cases in which they were victims (56.9 percent) of cruelty than were dogs (44.7 percent, chi-square = 32.39,  $p < .001$ ). In cases that did not reportedly

involve hoarding, there were no significant differences between cats and dogs in the number of animals abused (for cats, mean = 5.29; for dogs, mean = 6.87) or in the number of animals killed (for cats, mean = 3.34; for dogs, mean = 4.98).

Cats were significantly *overrepresented*, when compared to dogs, in incidents involving several specific forms of intentional abuse (Table 2).

There were no statistically significant differences between cat and dog cases in the incidence of hanging, stabbing, shooting, kicking, poisoning, or sexual assault (Table 3).

Animal cruelty often occurs within the context of family violence, particularly domestic violence (DeViney, Dickert, and Lockwood 1983; Ascione 1998; Ponder and Lockwood 2001). Companion animals are frequently threatened, injured, or killed to intimidate or retaliate against a family member. Overall, 4 percent of animal abuse cases included concurrent reports of domestic violence. The incidence rate was not statistically significant for cats vs. dogs (4.4 percent vs. 3.9 percent, chi-square = .28,  $p > .5$ ). However, children were more likely to witness cases of abuse of cats (5.0 percent) than of dogs (2.7 percent, chi-square = 6.43,  $p < .05$ ).

Young offenders were more likely to be identified as perpetrators in cases victimizing cats than in those involving dogs. Children under age seventeen accounted for 2.9 percent of intentional cat abuse cases and 1.2 percent of intentional dog abuse cases (chi-square = 6.95,  $p < .05$ ). Teens (seventeen to twenty-one years of age) accounted for 14.0 percent of all intentional cat abuse cases and 6.9 percent of dog cases (chi-square = 25.3,  $p < .001$ ). All of the fifteen reported cases of cat abuse by children under seventeen years of age involved boys, as did 95 percent of the dog abuse cases. Similarly, 94 percent of the sixty-nine intentional cat abuse

**Table 2**  
**Forms of Abuse in 3,488 Reported Cases of Animal Cruelty—Cats Overrepresented, by Percentage**

Form of Abuse	Cat Cruelty Cases	Dog Cruelty Cases	Chi Square	Significance
Torture	14.9	6.8	44.3	$p < .001$
Beating	13.4	10.7	4.0	$p < .050$
Throwing	11.4	5.3	32.7	$p < .001$
Mutilation	10.6	5.9	18.6	$p < .001$
Suffocation	3.4	1.5	10.7	$p < .001$
Drowning	2.3	.7	11.8	$p < .001$

**Table 3**  
**Forms of Abuse in 3,488 Reported Cases of Animal Cruelty—Cats and Dogs Equally Represented**

Form of Abuse	Cat Cruelty Cases	Dog Cruelty Cases	Chi Square	Significance
Shooting	13.4	14.8	.792	$p > .30$
Poisoning	4.1	3.3	1.060	$p > .30$
Stabbing	3.3	3.0	.202	$p > .60$
Kicking	2.7	3.7	1.460	$p > .20$
Hanging	2.0	1.5	.861	$P > .30$
Sexual Assault	.3	.6	1.140	$P > .28$

cases committed by teenagers involved boys, as did 97 percent of the teen dog abuse cases.

Cats were significantly *underrepresented* when compared with dogs in cases reportedly involving *neglect*. Of the 931 companion animal cases characterized as severe neglect of a small number of animals (rather than hoarding), 89.6 percent involved dogs and 10.4 percent involved cats. Looking at it another way, 36.2 percent of all dog-cruelty cases were described as “neglect,” vs. 16.6 percent of cat cases (chi-square = 82.7,  $p < .001$ ).

This reflects the prevailing societal view that cats are self-sufficient and are less likely to suffer if left unattended or not provided for, thus leaving them in this condition is often not perceived as neglect, even when it results in illness or injury.

Virtually all of the dog or cat cases involving “fighting” represented action against dogfighting operations. Cats were listed as victims in two of 224 cases counted as “fighting.” In these instances they were being used as bait or training animals. Dogs were significantly overrepresented in the 50 cases in which



**Table 4**  
**Victimology of Hoarding and**  
**Nonhoarding Cruelty Cases**

Type of Case	Mean Number Involved	Mean Number Killed
Dog: Nonhoarding	6.87	3.34
Dog: Hoarding	59.49	19.06
Cat: Nonhoarding	5.29	4.98
Cat: Hoarding	61.48	33.78

animals had been dragged behind a vehicle (96 percent of such cases).

Although a significantly higher proportion of cat cases involved intentional acts of malice, which are often a requirement for a criminal charge of animal abuse, charges were filed in significantly fewer cases involving cats than those involving dogs (56.4 percent of cat cases vs. 65.3 percent of dog cases, chi-square = 18.5,  $p < .001$ ). This is consistent with the general view that cats tend to be less valued than dogs, and that cruelty to cats, however extreme, is seen as less problematic than comparable maltreatment of dogs.

## Hoarding Cases

Animal hoarding is a form of animal cruelty that has received growing attention from veterinary, humane, and mental health professionals (Lockwood and Cassidy 1988; Mullen 1993; Lockwood 1994; Patronek 1999; HARC 2000; Davis 2003; Berry, Patronek, and Lockwood 2005) and the media (Arluke et al. 2002). The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) defines an animal hoarder as someone who:

- accumulates large numbers of animals;
- fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care;
- fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals;

and

- fails to act on or recognize the negative impact of the collection on his or her own health and well-being.

Overall, 412 cases in the database (9.0 percent) were characterized as animal-hoarding cases. By definition, these cases involved significantly higher numbers of animals than did nonhoarding cases, and, consequently, significantly more animals killed (Table 4). The number of dogs and cats *involved* did not differ significantly in hoarding cases. The mean number of animals *killed* was nearly twice as high in cat-hoarding cases as it was in dog-hoarding cases, but this was not statistically significant due to wide variation across cases and a smaller number of cases for which all of these details were available (62 hoarding cases and 1,382 nonhoarding cases) ( $t = -.326, p > .5$ ).

In this sample, women were significantly more likely than men to be involved in hoarding cases (62.5 percent vs. 37.5 percent, chi-square = 335,  $p < .001$ ). This is consistent with other reports of this phenomenon (Worth and Beck 1981; Patronek 1999; HARC 2000). Overall, perpetrators in hoarding cases were older than those in nonhoarding cruelty cases. The mean age for women was 52.6 years in hoarding cases and 38.8 years in all other cases ( $t = -11.2, p < .001$ ). The mean age for men was 48.7 years

in hoarding cases and 33.3 years in all other cases ( $t = -9.85, p < .001$ ). The women involved in hoarding cases were significantly older than the men ( $t = -1.98, p < .05$ ).

There were significant gender differences in the nature of animals who were hoarded (Table 5). Women were overrepresented in cases where cats were hoarded, either exclusively or in connection with dogs or other species. Men were significantly more likely to be involved in cases where dogs alone were victims of hoarding (chi-square = 32.9,  $p < .001$ ).

## Implications for Animal Welfare and Veterinary Professionals

Cruelty to cats is a widespread phenomenon with serious implications not only for animal welfare, but also for potential identification of situations where children, spouses, the elderly, and others may be at risk. It is likely that the incidence of cruelty to cats is underreported significantly. The widespread hostility to cats described above creates an environment in which cat cruelty, even when detected, is more likely to go unreported and/or unprosecuted.

Other characteristics of cat behavior and the human-cat relationship make it likely that much maltreatment of cats is overlooked. Dog owners will usually search for missing and potentially injured dogs if they do not return home when expected. Injured dogs, as highly social creatures, will often solicit care from people if they have been injured. In contrast, cat owners frequently fail to look for cats who do not return home, often assuming they have chosen a life of freedom. Injured cats are more likely to hide from, rather than seek contact with, people, consistent with their basic nature as soli-

tary predators. Fewer than 5 percent of cats entering U.S. shelters as strays are ever reclaimed.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Cruelty to cats, in its many forms, is a serious problem that *dramatically affects* many animals and the people who care about them. It also should raise concerns about perpetrators' potential for other acts of abuse and neglect that might affect other human and non-human victims. Professionals in veterinary medicine, animal behavior, and animal protection, as well as concerned individuals, can take several steps to focus greater attention on this problem.

### 1. Strengthen and enforce laws protecting cats and other companion animals.

The legal status of cats has undergone some curious changes in the last five hundred years. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was not uncommon for a wide variety of animal species, from insects to cattle, to be subjected to criminal prosecution, excommunication, and even execution in a manner almost identical to the treatment of humans (Evans 1906). Although cats often were killed along with their owners who had been accused of witchcraft, Evans found no cases in which a cat was the sole defendant. There were, however, many cases in which cats appeared as "witnesses" at the trials of thieves or murderers.

Most contemporary Western laws trace their origins to the Code Napoleon or English Common Law. The Code Napoleon recognized several kinds of cats. Wild cats were seen as noxious animals whose destruction could be rewarded, but the law declared that "the domestic cat, not being a thing of nought (*res nullius*) but the property of a master, ought to be protected by law" (Van Vechten 1936). In 1769

William Blackstone provided an early distinction in common law, differentiating between animals raised for food and those kept for "pleasure, curiosity, or whim," which included "dogs, bears, cats, apes, parrots, and singing birds," noting that "their value is not intrinsic, but depending only on the caprice of owners" (in Frasch et al. 2000, 47). Blackstone notes, however, that the ancient Britons viewed cats as "creatures of intrinsic value; and the killing or stealing [of] one was a grievous crime" (47).

For centuries, animal-cruelty laws have continued to view the crime of animal cruelty as a *property crime* that deprives the owner of the property or the use or enjoyment of that property (Favre and Tsang 1993), while society as a whole is increasingly likely to view such acts as a *morals crime*, indicative of poor character, or as a *violent crime* that inflicts suffering and/or death on a fellow sentient creature. Thus the legal response to cat-cruelty cases has often echoed the debates of Napoleonic and common law, centering on the value associated with cats and whether they can be considered "domesticated animals."

Some case law specifically accords cats the status of "domestic animals" (*Thurston v. Carter*, 92 A. 295 [Me. 1914]; cited in Young 2001). One of the more infamous decisions went the other way. In *Commonwealth v. Massini* (188 A. 2d 816, Pa. Super 1963), a man shot and killed his neighbor's cat. The court held that cats did not fit under the state cruelty code's definition of "domestic animal" and thus had "no intrinsic value in the eyes of the law" (Frasch et al. 2000). At the time the statute defined a domestic animal as "any equine animal, bovine animal, sheep, goat or pig." The statute was subsequently amended to "any dog, cat, equine animal, bovine animal, sheep, goat or porcine animal," removing the apparent exemption of cats from coverage in the state's criminal code. Although most states currently define "animal" or "domestic animal" in ways that clearly extend protections to cats, animal advocates should examine existing laws in their areas carefully to ensure that such protection exists.

Even when anti-cruelty laws clearly apply to cats, application of these laws may be hampered by the

**Table 5**  
**Species Involved in Animal Hoarding Cases**

Species Hoarded	Hoarder's Gender	
	Male	Female
Cats Only	25 (24.0 percent)	79 (76.0 percent)
Dogs Only	52 (56.5 percent)	40 (43.5 percent)
Both Cats and Dogs	11 (19.6 percent)	45 (80.4 percent)
Multiple Species with Cats and Dogs	30 (39.5 percent)	46 (60.5 percent)
Other Species	26 (49.1 percent)	27 (50.9 percent)

perception of the “value” of feline victims. In 1997 three teenage boys broke into an animal shelter in Iowa, bludgeoned sixteen cats and kittens to death, and injured seven others. The three were not charged with animal cruelty, in part because the existing animal-cruelty laws were weak and carried only minimal penalties. They were charged instead with third degree burglary and breaking into an animal facility (ironically, this law was passed with the intent to protect research laboratories from animal activists). These charges could have risen to the level of felony offenses had the damage inflicted on the “property,” that is, the cats, been in excess of \$500. Despite the fact that the shelter spent in excess of \$50 per animal for neutering, vaccination, and other care in preparation for adoption, a jury in the rural community decided that the twenty-three cats were not worth the \$500 required to elevate the crimes to the level of felony, and the men were convicted only of misdemeanors (Bollinger 1998).

Laws and policies developed to protect and control cats clearly have not kept pace with their status as America’s preferred pet. Even when strong anti-cruelty laws are in place, they may not be enforced vigorously by police, prosecutors, or judges, who may dismiss animal-cruelty cases as being of minor significance. As this study has shown, this is even more likely to be true of cases involving feline victims and young offenders. Cat abuse is not a normal teen pastime, and evidence suggests that ensuring that such behavior has immediate and serious consequences for the offender provides a chance for early intervention at a time when it is more likely to be effective.

There is some indication that the cat’s legal status is progressing slowly in other ways, but it still is not on the same level as that granted to dogs. At least a dozen states currently have “lemon” laws that allow

compensation to people who obtain companion animals who subsequently are shown to have preexisting diseases or genetic defects. The majority of these are specifically puppy “lemon” laws, but several (New York, Florida, Connecticut, and Arkansas) now include cats as well.

The courts are also evolving in their consideration of the effects of the death or injury of cats on those who care for them. In most court cases seeking redress for the loss of a companion animal, awards, when granted, have been limited to actual monetary value or veterinary costs. This has been changing as some courts consider the emotional significance of animal companions (Wise 1998; Young 2001), and recent decisions have allowed cat owners to sue for mental injuries when a cat was destroyed (*Peloquin v. Calcasieu Parish Police*, Jury S. 2d 1246 [La. Ct. App. 1979]) and for punitive damages in the malicious killing of a cat (*Wilson v. City of Eagan*, 297 N.W.2d 146 Mn. 1980). Still, the movement away from the common law view of cats as property with little or no intrinsic value has been slow.

#### **2. Educate the public and other professionals.**

Much cruelty to cats is rooted in long-standing myths and misconceptions about cat behavior and biology. Animal protection and veterinary medicine professionals need to continue to promote efforts to dispel such misinformation and to promote a high standard of care and responsibility in caring for cats. The HSUS initiated a “Safe Cats” campaign to dispel many of these ideas and promote responsible care, including a strong emphasis on the need to keep cats indoors (HSUS 2003).

#### **3. Respond to individuals and organizations promoting abusive practices.**

Cruelty to animals, including cats, should never be taken lightly. It causes enormous suffering for the animals and those who care for

and about them. Publishers, advertisers, and others who appear to condone or promote such cruelty should be notified of concerns and held accountable for treating cat abuse lightly. This should extend as well to strong opposition to organized and institutional abuse of cats, including the commercial trade in dog and cat fur (HSUS 1999) and use of cats in research involving pain and distress (Spiegel 2003).

#### **4. Promote humane control of “problem” or feral cats.**

Historically, communities have responded to cat-related conflicts by using methods that rarely provide long-term solutions. The HSUS believes that community cat care and control programs should include the following (HSUS 2002):

- Mandatory registration or licensing of cats. If a fee is charged, it should be higher for unsterilized cats than for sterilized cats (“differential licensing”).
- Mandatory identification of cats. In addition to requiring that cats wear collars and tags, communities should consider implementing a permanent identification system such as microchips.
- Mandatory rabies vaccinations for all cats more than three months of age.
- Mandatory sterilization of all cats adopted from public and private animal shelters and rescue groups.
- Mandatory sterilization of all free-roaming cats.
- A mandatory minimum shelter holding period for stray cats consistent with that established for stray dogs. This policy should allow for euthanasia of suffering animals before the end of the holding period.
- Adequate and appropriate shelter holding space, staffing, and other resources necessary to hold stray felines for the

mandatory minimum holding period.

- An ongoing public education program that promotes responsible cat care.
- Subsidized sterilization services to encourage cat owners to sterilize their animals.

While cats may never again achieve the special status they had in ancient Egypt, they are loved and admired by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Ensuring that they live safe, healthy, and happy lives is an important part of having a truly humane society.

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