



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

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An Overview of Animal Cruelty Against Cats

Companion animals are a beloved staple of many American homes. According to the 2017-2018 APPA National Pet Owners Survey, 38% of Americans have a cat in the home^[1]. Unfortunately, not all cats receive the same loving environment. Some suffer the injustices of animal cruelty.

What is animal cruelty?

The definition of animal cruelty can vary by state but a general definition of animal cruelty is “acts of violence or neglect perpetrated against animals”^[2]. The term animal cruelty can encompass a large array of acts such as animal neglect, bestiality, ritual abuse, mutilation, and animal torture among many others. Animal cruelty is usually divided into animal neglect and intentional cruelty.

- **Animal neglect:** Animal neglect is a prevalent form of animal cruelty where a person fails to provide adequate care for the animal. The exact definition of animal neglect varies by state and can include acts like failing to provide food, water, veterinary care, and protection from the weather^[3]. Animal neglect differentiates itself from intentional cruelty because the perpetrator usually does not have the mens rea (guilty mind) when committing the act. Despite this, in cases of severe neglect such as kitten mills, the offender is aware of the adverse effects of their actions. Animal neglect is largely prosecuted as a misdemeanor, but Washington and California have laws allowing severe animal neglect to be prosecuted as a felony.
- **Intentional animal cruelty:** Intentional cruelty covers acts of violence intentionally committed against animals. Intentional animal cruelty can be convicted as a misdemeanor or felony depending on the severity of the crime. For example, in Maryland a person “may not overdrive or overload an animal; deprive an animal of necessary sustenance; inflict unnecessary suffering or pain” under the state’s misdemeanor section. Maryland also has a separate section in its anti-cruelty laws for aggravated cruelty to animals which includes intentionally mutilating, torturing, cruelly beating, and cruelly killing an animal. A person guilty of aggravated cruelty to animals in Maryland would be charged with a felony.

The exact number of incidents of animal cruelty each year is unknown. Since animals cannot speak up for themselves many crimes go unreported. Further, animal cruelty cases are difficult to prosecute. According to the FBI, there were 1,126 animal cruelty cases reported to their system in 2016^[4]. Cats are estimated to be the second most common victim of animal cruelty after dogs^[5].

What are the laws against animal cruelty?

Each state has an anti-cruelty statute which can be seen [here](#) at the Animal Legal Defense Fund. The state cruelty laws distinguish crimes that are misdemeanors and crimes that are a felony. Today, all 50 states have felony animal cruelty

laws. A person convicted of a misdemeanor can serve up to one year of jail time maximum. Felonies are the most serious type of crime a person can be convicted of and the maximum punishment for felony animal cruelty varies by state.

There is no general federal animal cruelty law but there are federal laws against animal cruelty in cases that cross state borders. One example of a federal law against animal cruelty is the Animal Crush Video Prohibition Act of 2010. This law prohibits the sale and distribution of videos that depict animals being crushed and tortured to death. Since these videos are largely sold across state lines, the federal government has jurisdiction to act.

Are feral cats included in animal cruelty laws?

Feral cats are included in many anti-cruelty laws but may be specifically excluded in certain provisions. For example, in South Dakota a person can only be charged with the poisoning or killing of an animal that is owned by another person. Feral or stray cats would likely be excluded from this definition. In Wyoming, stray cats are defined as a predatory animal and the “destruction” of them is exempted from anti-cruelty laws.

Why are people cruel to cats?

People are cruel to cats for a variety of reasons, which often depends on the type of crime. For example, people who commit animal neglect may lack the proper knowledge on how to care for a cat. Many animal control officers or police officers will first try to educate owners in these cases before citing or arresting them.

People who commit intentional animal cruelty are not misinformed but are purposefully hurting a cat which is often the result of violent tendencies. A cat is an easy victim for them to abuse because they can be trusting towards people, cannot speak up for themselves, and are living in many American homes.

Violence towards animals usually begins at a young age. There is a well-documented connection between animal cruelty and domestic violence. Sixty-two percent of women interviewed in a domestic violence shelter reported that their children had witnessed the abuse of a pet[6]. Children are very perceptive and often learn social behaviors by watching their parents. Children who witness animal cruelty or domestic violence are prone to becoming violent themselves, because they learn that these behaviors are acceptable. Children exposed to domestic violence are nearly three times more likely to engage in animal abuse later in life[7].

Animal abuse can also stem from conduct disorder which is a group of behavioral problems where juveniles are unable to follow rules and social norms. Children with conduct disorder often exhibit aggression towards animals.

Can animal abuse lead to violence against people?

Yes, animal abuse can often lead to violence against people. Animal cruelty is considered an indicator crime; which means the presence of animal cruelty indicates a violent personality. This personality will often progress towards human violence. A highly cited MSPCA study in 1997 found that people who abused animals are five times more likely to commit violent crimes against people[8]. Animal cruelty is a known predictor of a future serial killer, which an FBI study confirmed in 1988[9].

What can I do about animal cruelty?

- Be aware of the signs of animal cruelty. These include but are not limited to:
 - A person who keeps changing their story about their cat’s history or cat’s injury
 - Other forms of violence in a home such as child abuse and domestic violence
 - A person has a cat in poor condition such as chronic injuries that are left untreated, hair loss and/or matted fur
 - A person has a cat who is extremely thin, often with visible bones

- A person hurts a cat. Do not confront the person. Contact the department that handles animal cruelty in your area once you are away from the abuser.
- Teach children compassion for animals at a young age. If you don't have pets at home, take your child to visit a local shelter or read your child books with animals in them.
- Advocate for laws that address the connection between human violence and animal abuse such as laws that require cross-reporting between professionals in animal control, domestic violence intervention, adult protection services, and child protective services.
- If you live in Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, or Wyoming urge your state legislators to pass a law to allow pets on Orders of Protection.

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