
Childhood Animal Cruelty and Mass Shootings: Understanding Indicators of Adult Interpersonal Violence

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Abstract

The United States is in the midst of a growing epidemic of mass shootings. 2021, the most recent year in which data is available, saw 692 mass shootings, leading to the deaths of 701 people and the wounding of an additional 2,841. (Donnelly, et. al. 2023). Thus, it is more important than ever for law enforcement to recognize the warning signs and act early to prevent tragedy. The connection between childhood animal cruelty (CAC) and adult violent and antisocial behavior, including mass shootings, is well documented. 43% of school shooters committed animal cruelty before their massacres (Arluke & Madfis 2014), and in one study of 257 inmates, the only statistically significant predictor of recurrent adult interpersonal violence was CAC. (Trentham, et. al. 2018).

This paper attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on this link, focusing on elucidating which characteristics of a given act of animal cruelty may serve as particularly salient indicators of future acts of interpersonal violence. The intent is to educate law enforcement officials, especially those who work in schools, and other professionals, including social workers and teachers, about these characteristics. Specifically, CAC inflicted **for fun, recurrent** acts of CAC, CAC inflicted upon commonly **anthropomorphized species**, and CAC committed in an **up-close** and personal manner (FRAU). In addition to educating law enforcement, there are a number of policy prescriptions that, if enacted, could help to identify future mass shooters and offer options for early intervention, a necessary step to thwarting these acts of horrific violence.

Definitions

Animal cruelty: socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal. (Ascione 2015).

Externalizing disorder: a grouping of psychiatric diagnoses which usually manifest in problems appropriately engaging with one's environment, including antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and impulsivity. (Krueger, et. Al. 2008)

Mass murder: a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. (Morton 2005).

Fig. 1. Definitions. In this figure, we seek to define a few terms (animal cruelty, externalizing disorder, and mass murder) as they are understood in this paper.

Background

Public awareness of the link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence is on the rise, and for good reason. Studies have shown that animal abuse is the most reliable indicator of violent behavior in adulthood. (Lini & Bidaisee 2023). In the midst of an epidemic of mass shootings in America, it has become clear that a common thread between many of the perpetrators of these atrocities is their known histories of committing acts of cruelty against animals as children and adolescents.

Case Studies

In 1997, Luke Woodham murdered his mother and two schoolmates in Pearl, MS. Before carrying out his attacks, he tortured and killed his family dog by setting her on fire. In his journal, he reflected on this experience, describing her dying howls as “a thing of beauty.” (Hodges 2008).

In 1998, Kipland Kinkel murdered his parents and opened fire at his high school in Springfield, OR, killing two and wounding 25. Kinkel had a history of torturing animals before his killing spree, including blowing up cows and decapitating cats. (Hodges 2008).

In 2022, Salvador Ramos murdered 19 young students and two teachers and injured an additional 17 victims in a school shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, TX. Ramos had a history of abusing animals, often in public, and then posting videos of the cruelty online. This included strangling cats in plastic bags, beating them, and throwing them at houses. He reportedly would show these videos to his peers, laughing at his actions as he watched them play back. (Katersky, et. al. 2022).

Also in 2022, it was found that Payton Gendron, the white supremacist who murdered 10 black patrons at a grocery store in Buffalo, NY, had documented himself killing a cat and posted it online. (Katersky, et. al. 2022).

Other high-profile instances of school shooters who had a history of committing acts of animal cruelty before their attacks include Nikolas Cruz, the Parkland, FL shooter and Ethan Crumbley, the Oxford, MI shooter. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the teenagers who carried out the infamous mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, bragged about mutilating animals prior to opening fire at their high school. (Pacelle & Marshall 2022).

Profiling

Based on this knowledge, law enforcement professionals, especially ones who work with children such as school resource officers, have an important role to play in recognizing behavioral red flags and intervening early. However, it is important to note that while a large plurality of mass shooters have histories of CAC, not every child who commits animal cruelty becomes a killer. (Coleman 2023).

It is therefore not sufficient for law enforcement professionals seeking to build profiles and react to warning signs to have only a cursory knowledge of the link between animal cruelty and acts of mass violence. Rather, it is imperative for these professionals to understand the many forms CAC may take and be able to recognize which specific characteristics of the crime are predictive of an individual who may go on to commit mass violence later in their life.

Methods

Using major research databases such as Google Scholar, a list of papers focusing on links between CAC and adult interpersonal violence with particular attention paid to those concerning mass shootings were compiled. Each paper was reviewed with a focus on information which would be helpful in narrowing down which specific kinds of CAC ought to be of particular concern to law enforcement officials seeking to identify potential future perpetrators. This information was then used to structure our recommendations for law enforcement education and broader policy initiatives.

Results

In reviewing the existing body of literature concerning the link between CAC and adult interpersonal violence with a focus on mass shooters, multiple themes emerged, marking certain qualities of CAC as particularly salient predictors of future interpersonal violence. These qualities were CAC committed for fun, recurrent acts of CAC, CAC committed against commonly anthropomorphized species, and CAC committed in an up-close and personal manner. While these qualities are all significant indicators on their own, acts of CAC that fall into multiple categories should be of highest concern.

A key thread between these indicators is their association with behaviors considered to be indicative of a possible externalizing disorder and/or a lack of empathy. They are demonstrative of the kind of anti-social, misanthropic, and violent tendencies that are associated with mass shooters.

While we will explore potential psychological explanations underlying each of these indicators to provide a broader context and conceptual framework, for the purposes of law

Qualities of Childhood Animal Cruelty Predictive of Interpersonal Violence in Adulthood (FRAU)

For fun

Recurrent

Anthropomorphized species

Up-close and personal

Fig. 2. Qualities of Childhood Animal Cruelty Predictive of Intepersonal Violence in Adulthood (FRAU). This figure provides an overview of our proposed acronym (FRAU) for remembering the four qualities of CAC that are the most salient indicators of interpersonal violence in adulthood. These indicators are CAC committed for fun (F), recurrent CAC (R), CAC that targets commonly anthropomorphized species (A), and CAC that was committed by means of an up-close and personal method (U).



enforcement officials, the psychological reasoning for why these indicators are salient is not important. Trying to match individual perpetrators of CAC to assumed psychological profiles of school shooters, especially by officials who lack formal psychological or psychiatric training, may work to obscure children whose behavior displays red flags if they are perceived not to match this profile. From a law enforcement perspective, it is most important to be familiar with these indicators, recognize them, and act proactively to prevent future interpersonal violence.

Motivation

As was previously established, not all children who commit acts of CAC go on to commit interpersonal violence in adulthood. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish certain characteristics of CAC which serve as indicators that a child may go on to become a perpetrator of such violence. One of these characteristics is the motivation behind a child committing an act of CAC. Hensley & Tallichet looked into retrospectively reported motivations for CAC (fun, anger, dislike for the animal, imitation) in a survey of inmates and found that the single most salient predictor of adult interpersonal violence is CAC committed for fun. (Hensley & Tallichet 2008). They also found that CAC offenders motivated by anger or fun were much more likely to become recurrent offenders. (Hensley & Tallichet 2008).

It makes sense that anger and fun as motivators would be the best indicators given the psychological profile of a child who would engage in such behaviors – fun in particular. A child committing CAC to imitate something they've seen or because they dislike the animal is certainly engaging in troubling behavior but may not comprehend the extent of the harm they are inflicting or even that they are inflicting harm at all (in the case of imitation). Anger and fun are both motivators rooted in an intention to cause suffering, and it is also worth noting that anger in particular serves as a common motivation for acts of adult interpersonal violence. CAC committed for fun implies both an intention to cause suffering to another being and an enjoyment of that suffering. Thus, the psychology of a CAC perpetrator who committed their acts for fun is very much in line with what one would expect to find in an adult perpetrator of interpersonal violence, especially a mass shooter.

Recurrence

Perpetrators of CAC who commit these acts recurrently should also be of increased concern. Recurrence is the best supported indicator of interpersonal violence in adulthood across the literature with one study finding it to be the only statistically significant indicator of adult interpersonal violence (Trentham, et. al. 2018) and another noting recurrent CAC's extreme links to later interpersonal violence. (Wauthier & Williams 2021). Due to the consistency of these findings, we consider recurrence to be the single most important indicator. This is consistent with what we expect based on the traits that may differentiate a one-time CAC offender from a recurrent CAC offender.

It is possible for a child to commit an act of CAC without fully understanding the gravity of what they are doing and the extent to which they are inflicting harm upon another being. However, even if they were unaware of this fact before their first offense, their act of CAC would undoubtedly demonstrate to them the severity of this kind of behavior. It stands to reason, then, that recurrent acts of CAC would have to have been committed with full awareness of the gravity and extent of the suffering being inflicted.

Additionally, even a child who did understand their act of CAC would cause harm and carried it out with that intention might still be deeply affected when that harm becomes realized as their understanding of what it means to inflict suffering (and of suffering in general) moves from the abstract to the tangible, thus deterring them from committing similar acts in the future.

This means that unlike one-time offenders who did intend to cause harm with their initial offense but were put off from committing such an act again after witnessing the realization of this intention, recurrent offenders are not only knowledgeable of the suffering they are causing and intentional in its infliction but have also not been deterred when confronted with the realization of their intent to cause harm – they might have even been encouraged by it.

Animal Targeted

The type of animal that was victimized in an act of CAC may also serve as an indicator. The cruelty inflicted on animals by children who go on to become school shooters is almost always inflicted upon commonly anthropomorphized species such as dogs and cats. (Arluke & Madfis 2014).

The through line here is clear as the targeting of anthropomorphized species could very easily reflect the desire to inflict harm on people. It also indicates a desire to inflict pain upon beings commonly understood to have the capacity to understand, feel, and process that pain. In other words, beings with the capacity to suffer. This targeting of anthropomorphized species may also be indicative of a predilection towards misanthropy, lacking empathy, and anti-social behavior.

Method

It is also important to look at the means by which an act of CAC was carried out. CAC committed by children who went on to become school shooters was committed in an up-close and personal manner in nearly every instance. (Arluke & Madfis 2014). Up-close and personal methods include modes of cruelty such as strangulation and mutilation where the offending child is intimately engaged in the act of cruelty they are committing. This differs from other common forms of CAC such as shooting at an animal with a BB gun.

As was true of the other predictive qualities of CAC listed before, this behavior is indicative of a certain psychology surrounding violence. Children engaging in up-close and personal acts of CAC

would be aware of the pain and suffering they were causing much more intimately and immediately than a child engaging in these acts at a distance who could possibly, though not necessarily, be unaware of the extent to which they were causing harm.

Revisiting Case Studies

Now that the four qualities of CAC that were found to be predictive of interpersonal violence in adulthood have been explored, we may see how they apply to our case studies from earlier.

While we discussed at the beginning that other mass shootings – Parkland, FL; Oxford, MI; Littleton, CO – were perpetrated by individuals with known and/or professed histories of childhood animal cruelty, the specifics of these crimes are unclear. As such, we lack the knowledge necessary to apply the FRAU indicator model to these cases, and they will not be explored in further detail.

The four other case studies mentioned above that contained sufficient information for analysis were reviewed and assessed for the presence or absence of each FRAU indicator. In every instance, at least one of these indicators was present, and in most cases multiple were exhibited.

Starting with the 1997 shootings in Pearl, MS, we can see that the perpetrator's act of CAC was inflicted upon his family dog whom he tortured and killed via immolation (commonly anthropomorphized species, up-close and personal). He went on to reflect positively on the experience in his

Applying FRAU to Past Cases

Pearl, MS (1997)

- ✓ For fun
- X Recurrent
- ✓ Anthropomorphized species
- ✓ Up-close and personal

Springfield, OR (1998)

- X For fun
- ✓ Recurrent
- ✓ Anthropomorphized species
- ✓ Up-close and personal

Uvalde, TX (2022)

- ✓ For fun
- ✓ Recurrent
- ✓ Anthropomorphized species
- ✓ Up-close and personal

Buffalo, NY (2022)*

- X For fun
- X Recurrent
- ✓ Anthropomorphized species
- X Up-close and personal

Fig. 3. Applying FRAU to Mass Shooter Case Studies. This figure provides a streamlined visualization of our analysis of four mass shooters' histories of CAC using the FRAU (for-fun, recurrent, commonly anthropomorphized species, up-close/personal) grouping of salient indicators. Each case was assessed for the presence or absence of each indicator, and the findings are here displayed in the form of a checklist. The 1997 Pearl, MS and 1998 Springfield, OR perpetrators both displayed 3/4 of the qualities (FAU and RAU respectively), the 2022 Uvalde, TX perpetrator displayed all four, and the 2022 Buffalo, NY perpetrator displayed at least 1/4 (A). Information on the specifics of the Buffalo perpetrator's animal cruelty is not publicly available beyond that he had posted online about killing a cat.

journal with particular attention paid to the beauty of his dog's dying howls of severe pain (committed for fun).

In the case of the 1998 shootings in Springfield, OR, the perpetrator had tortured animals on multiple occasions leading up to his murders (recurrence). These acts of CAC took multiple forms, including the decapitation of a cat (up-close and personal, commonly anthropomorphized species).

The perpetrator of the 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, TX also had a history of abusing animals on multiple occasions (recurrence). His acts of CAC included instances in which he strangled cats in plastic bags and beat them (up-close and personal, commonly anthropomorphized species). Additionally, he would film these crimes and upload them online to show to his peers who report that he would laugh while rewatching his acts of cruelty (committed for fun/pleasure).

Finally, while the specifics and extent of the CAC carried out by the perpetrator of the racist mass shooting in Buffalo, NY are not publicly accessible, it is known that he had documented killing a cat in the same online forums where he planned the attack (commonly anthropomorphized species).

Recommendations

First and foremost, it is vital that we develop better screening practices and adequately educate school resource officers and other professionals who work with children regularly on behavioral red flags. Acts of CAC should be analyzed and any offenders whose cruelty displays FRAU indicators ought to be flagged for psychiatric intervention.

Second, we must develop a means by which animal cruelty cases displaying FRAU indicators that end up in the court system can be treated with increased gravity, thus that harsher penalties and greater opportunities for diversion into psychiatric treatment are available. Creating an "enhanced animal cruelty" felony, as proposed by Coleman, which focuses on these kinds of abuse would help distinguish offenders at greater risk of future interpersonal violence, allowing for more serious consequences and a higher likelihood of psychiatric intervention. (Coleman 2023).

Finally, it is important to note that the key to success in both of these strategies is the diversion of offenders towards psychiatric interventions that seek to address their underlying issues. Any form of punishment that does not also include addressing the psychology behind this kind of offense will be completely inadequate at preventing future violence. This requires sufficient funding for psychiatric services in addition to open communication and collaboration between law enforcement officials and medical professionals.

Conclusion

Childhood animal cruelty (CAC) is one of the best indicators of future adult interpersonal violence. It is no wonder that many of America's mass shooters had histories of CAC in the years leading up to their atrocities. With that in mind, law enforcement officials (especially school resource officers and other officials who engage with children frequently) need to be alert to potential red flags so that interventions may be pursued early and future violence may be prevented. The problem arises that while many children commit acts of CAC, most of them do not go on to become mass shooters or violent criminals, and there are not enough resources to target all CAC offenders for behavioral monitoring and psychiatric intervention. Thus, it is important to note the certain qualities of CAC that serve as much more salient indicators of interpersonal violence in adulthood as compared to CAC in general.

The qualities of CAC found to meet this standard are 1) CAC committed for fun, 2) recurrent CAC, 3) CAC targeting commonly anthropomorphized species, and 4) CAC carried out in an up-close and personal manner. These four qualities can be abbreviated as FRAU, a helpful mnemonic for the purposes of education and retention. The qualities highlighted in FRAU are indicative of a pattern of thinking and behavior that are consistent with the psychological profile of mass shooters and other perpetrators of interpersonal violence. FRAU behaviors are potentially symptomatic of externalizing disorders, a lack of empathy, and anti-social tendencies.

Based on this, improved screening practices that focus on CAC offenders whose acts include FRAU indicators, early intervention for flagged offenders, and the implementation of a felony charge for animal cruelty offenses that display FRAU characteristics should all be considered by law enforcement officials and policymakers.

Through broader public awareness, better law enforcement training, increased action from policymakers, and further research, FRAU may serve as a key instrument in our work to end the epidemic of mass shootings in America, curbing general adult interpersonal violence in the process.

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She went on to found the Animal Law Source, Georgia Humane Society, The Animal Protection Society and the Animal Protection and Wellness (APAW) Expo. Claudine has been instrumental in drafting twelve Georgia state laws related to animals and public safety and has published over a thousand ALS Toolkits© providing comprehensive overviews of animal law topics. Over the last three decades, Claudine has shaped the way our justice system responds to animal related cases. Through her work, better laws are on the books, crucial information is accessible online, and victims (both animal and human) have found justice.

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