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# Mass-Shooters and Animal Abuse

## From animal abuser to mass shooter: profile, policy & prevention

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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. For instance, 43% of school shooters committed animal cruelty before their massacres. (Arluke & Madfis 2014). This paper attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on this link.

### BACKGROUND

Not every child who commits animal cruelty becomes a killer, but most serial killers abused animals as children. (Coleman 2023).

Animal abuse is the most reliable indicator of violent behavior in adulthood. (Lini & Bidaisee 2023). In one study of 257 inmates, the only statistically significant predictor of recurrent adult interpersonal violence was childhood animal cruelty. (Trentham, et. al. 2018).

### RESULTS

General findings: Offenders with a history of animal cruelty were more likely to be young and white, less likely to die at the scene of the crime, and more likely to kill and/or wound a large number of people. (Arluke, et. al. 2018)

**PSYCHOLOGY:** Externalizing disorders, Lower empathy

**ENVIRONMENT:** Adverse childhood experiences, Witnessing violence, especially cruelty to animals

**RECURRENCE:** Emphasize that this the the most important predictor

**OTHER FACTORS:** The single most salient predictor of adult interpersonal violence is childhood animal abuse committed for fun. (Hensley & Tallichet 2008). The cruelty inflicted on animals by children who go on to become school shooters is almost always inflicted in an up-close manner on commonly anthropomorphized species such as dogs and cats. (Arluke & Madfis 2014).

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Better screening practices, Early intervention

Not all animal cruelty is equal, and there are certain qualities the crime can have that act as much stronger predictors of future violent behavior. Creating an “enhanced animal cruelty” felony which focuses on these kinds of abuse (the intentional killing of a companion or service animal through up-close means including, but not limited to, bludgeoning, strangling, and mutilating) 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).



## REFERENCES

Arluke, A., & Madfis, E. (2014). Animal Abuse as a Warning Sign of School Massacres: A Critique and Re-finement. *Homicide Studies*, 18(1), 7-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767913511459>

- Based on a sample of 23 perpetrators of school shootings between 1988 and 2012, this study found that **43% of school shooters committed animal cruelty before their massacres**. Notably, **this cruelty is almost always inflicted in an up-close manner on commonly anthropomorphized species** such as dogs and cats.

Arluke, A., Lankford, A., & Madfis E. (2018). Harming animals and massacring humans: Characteristics of public mass and active shooters who abused animals. *Behavioral Science Law*, 36(6), 739-751.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2385>

- This study examined public reports of animal cruelty perpetrated by future active and mass shooters. The 20 cases they identified indicated that **offenders with a history of animal cruelty were more likely to be young and white, less likely to die at the crime scene, and more likely to kill and/or wound a large number of people**.

Coleman, P. (2023). Targeting School Shootings: Using Three Warning Signs—Animal Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Conduct Disorder—To Help Prevent Massacres, *Widener Commonwealth Law Review*, 65(32), 65-142.

- Not every child who commits animal cruelty becomes a killer, but **most serial killers abused animals as children**. There are **potential solutions** to preventing mass shootings rooted in this fact, including **the creation of an enhanced animal cruelty felony** which focuses on the kinds of animal abuse that are strong predictors of violent and antisocial behaviors (the intentional killing of a companion or service animal through up-close means such as mutilating, bludgeoning, or strangling). It is also important to **improve threat assessments** to accurately represent the kinds of animal cruelty with strong links to interpersonal violence. Additionally, **early intervention is vital**, so anyone convicted of enhanced animal cruelty under the age of 25 should receive **psychological evaluations and treatment**.

Donnelly, M., et. al. (2023) Trends in mass shootings in the United States (2013-2021): A worsening American epidemic of death. *The American Journal of Surgery*, 226(2), 197-201.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.am.jsurg.2023.03.028>

- This study used data from the Gun Violence archive to track gun violence over time and look at the effect of gun control on mass shootings. **In 2021, the most recent year in which data is available, there were 692 mass shootings resulting in 2,841 injuries and 701 deaths.**



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Hensley, C., & Tallichet, S. E. (2008). The Effect of Inmates' Self-Reported Childhood and Adolescent Animal Cruelty: Motivations on the Number of Convictions for Adult Violent Interpersonal Crimes. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 52(2), 175-184.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X07303913>

- This study used self-reported data from 261 inmates that includes both history of childhood animal abuse and motivations for childhood animal abuse (hatred of animal, anger, fun, etc.) and used regression analysis to compare these results to the inmates' criminal records of violent interpersonal offenses. **The single most salient predictor of adult interpersonal violence was childhood animal abuse committed for fun.**

Lini, N., & Bidaisee, S. (2023). Analyzing the Psychology Behind Animal Abuse and Tendencies of Human Criminality. *Applied Medical Research*, 10(1), 1-4. [https://doi.org/10.47363/AMR/2023\(10\)231](https://doi.org/10.47363/AMR/2023(10)231)

- This study is an analysis of existing research on the link between committing animal abuse or being exposed to animal abuse as a child and acts of interpersonal violence later in life. **Animal cruelty is the most reliable indicator of violent behavior in adulthood.**

Trentham, C. E., Hensley, C., & Policastro, C. (2018). Recurrent Childhood Animal Cruelty and Its Link to Recurrent Adult Interpersonal Violence. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 62(8), 2345-2356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X17720175>

- This study used a sample of 257 inmates at a medium-security prison in the South and aimed to identify predictors of recurrent adult interpersonal violence. **The only predictor of statistical significance was recurrent childhood animal cruelty.**

Wauthier, L. M., & Williams, J. M. (2021). Understanding and Conceptualizing Childhood Animal Harm: A Meta-Narrative Systematic Review. *Anthrozoös*, 35(2), 165–202.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2021.1986262>

- This study is a meta-analysis of 69 studies on childhood animal cruelty. It was found that (1) **exposure to childhood adversity**, especially experiences of witnessing violence against humans or animals, **is an environmental predictor of childhood animal cruelty**, (2) **recurrent childhood animal cruelty has extreme links to later interpersonal violence**, (3) externalizing disorders, lower empathy, lower self-esteem, poorer family functioning, and attitudes of accepting cruelty are among the psychological risk factors for childhood animal cruelty, (4) witnessing animal cruelty is a significant risk factor for a range of maladaptive behaviors, and (5) there are a range of psychosocial barriers to the accurate reporting and measuring of childhood animal cruelty.
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### **CLAUDINE WILKINS, ESQ.**

Claudine is a former prosecutor who became a personal injury trial attorney in 1999. She began her career as a prosecutor at a time when animal-related cases were not given credence. After witnessing animal cases consistently “falling through the cracks,” she began to take on and successfully prosecute these cases. She went on to found the Animal Law Source, Georgia Humane Society, and the Animal Protection and Wellness Expo (APAW). 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.

For more information go to [www.animallawsource.org](http://www.animallawsource.org). Your number one source for Animal Laws.

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