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Violence against family animals in the context of intimate partner violence

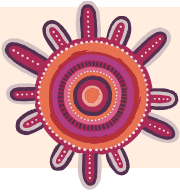
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Australian Institute of Family Studies

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Sensitive content warning

This practice guide includes information about intimate partner violence and violence against animals, including sexual, physical and psychological abuse. If you require assistance or would like to talk to a trained professional about the issues described in this paper, please call:

- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Sexual assault and family violence service: 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

If you believe someone is in immediate danger call Police on 000.

If you require assistance in relation to animal abuse, this can be reported to the RSPCA. Further information and reporting details for each state and territory are available here:

- [Report animal cruelty | RSPCA Australia](#)

Overview

This policy and practice paper describes what we know about the relationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) and violence against family animals. It covers: (a) the forms of violence against family animals in an IPV context; (b) why perpetrators of IPV use violence against family animals; (c) how violence against family animals affects victim-survivors; and (d) implications for practice including tips for supporting clients who may be experiencing violence against family animals in an IPV context.

Key messages

- Some evidence suggests that violence against family animals may be an indicator of frequent and severe IPV patterns.
- Perpetrators may threaten, harm or kill family animals with an intention to control victim-survivors, cause emotional distress and/or control animals.
- Violence against family animals has negative effects on the physical and psychological wellbeing of victim-survivors, including children and family animals.
- Many victim-survivors report staying with, delaying leaving or returning to perpetrators due to fears for the safety of family animals left with the perpetrator.
- Actions at the practitioner, service and systemic levels to strengthen support for victim-survivors of IPV who have experienced violence against family animals include:
 - screening for violence against family animals and providing support with animal-inclusive safety planning
 - increasing access to animal-inclusive crisis accommodation
- strengthening relationships between IPV support services, animal welfare services and law enforcement.

Abbreviations used in this policy and practice guide

DFV	Domestic and family violence
IPV	Intimate partner violence

Introduction

In Australia, relationships between humans and animals are common and emotionally significant for people. Approximately 69% of Australian households include pets (referred to here as 'family animals'; Animal Medicines Australia, 2022). Many people form strong bonds with family animals and consider them family members (Budinski & Gahan, 2023; Hageman et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 2022; Lindsay, 2022; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2022; Newberry, 2017). For example, the 2021 Families in Australia Survey found that 52% of respondents included pets in their perceptions of family and that women were more likely than men to count animals as part of the family (Budinski & Gahan, 2023).

IPV is a major health and welfare issue currently affecting Australian families. Statistics show that 1 in 4 women have experienced some form of abuse by a current or previous partner (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018). Given these high rates of IPV and the high prevalence of households with family animals, it is unsurprising that family animals are often present in situations where there is IPV. Further, research suggests that family animals can be victims of violence as part of a larger pattern of IPV and that violence against family animals may be an indicator of frequent or severe forms of IPV (Barrett et al., 2017; Cleary et al., 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022). The *National Plan to End Violence Against Women*

and *Children* (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2022) recognises animal abuse as one of several violent behaviours that perpetrators of IPV use to establish and maintain power and dominance over victim-survivors.¹

There is no universal definition of IPV-related violence against family animals – however, it can be broadly understood as violence perpetrated against family animals with the intention of causing emotional distress for the victim-survivor of IPV and/or a means to manipulate or force the victim-survivor to follow the perpetrator’s demands.

The purpose of this resource

This policy and practice paper synthesises the empirical research to describe what we know about the use of violence against family animals in the context of IPV. It outlines:

- what this type of violence is
- why some perpetrators of IPV use violence against family animals
- the impacts of violence against family animals on victim-survivors, children and family animals
- implications for practice, including recommendations to increase support for victim-survivors.

The nature of the evidence on family animals and IPV

The research team conducted a rapid literature review to inform the content of this paper. Through the review process we identified a substantial body of research about violence against family animals in the context of IPV published within the last 5–10 years. Most of the studies were conducted in Canada and the USA, with some in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. These locations are considered broadly relevant to Australia. However, there may be contextual differences and further research in Australia would be useful to improve understanding of the impacts of IPV-related violence against family animals in Australia. One such example is research focused on the experiences of families in rural and remote Australia.

The existing research evidence provides descriptive in-depth assessments of the lived experience of victim-survivors of IPV who live with family animals and of practitioners who work with victim-survivors. Almost all research participants were recruited from DFV support services, including crisis accommodation. Qualitative data drawn from surveys and interviews with these participants provide useful descriptions of what IPV-related violence against family animals looks like. They broaden our understanding of its impacts on victim-survivors as well as the barriers they experienced to accessing appropriate support services. However, the literature review found almost no evidence on quantitative factors, such as prevalence rates, risk factors or protective factors.

It is also important to note that research detailing the experiences of victim-survivors who have not accessed formal support services is lacking. There are many reasons victim-survivors of IPV do not access support services, including a lack of access or knowledge of available services. Inclusion of perspectives from these populations would help with deeper understanding of this complex topic – however, recruitment of participants outside of support service contexts is difficult. The existing research literature does not address how best to facilitate broader victim-survivor recruitment.

Recommendations for improvements to support services to better meet the needs of victim-survivors with family animals were drawn from the research evidence at practitioner, service and systemic levels. Further research about implementation and evaluation of recommendations is needed.

Rates of violence against family animals in an IPV context

In homes where there is IPV and one or more family animal, it can be common for victim-survivors to report that family animals were threatened, harmed or even killed by perpetrators (Barrett et al., 2018; Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Giesbrecht, 2022; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Newberry, 2017; Tiplady et

¹ In this paper, ‘victim-survivor’ refers to someone who has been the target of IPV by a current or ex-intimate partner and ‘perpetrator’ refers to someone who uses IPV (Victorian Government, 2022).

al., 2015). Accurate prevalence rates of IPV-related violence against family animals are difficult to determine. Statistics on it are not included as a part of government reported IPV or DFV statistics.

A systematic review by Cleary and colleagues (2021) of Australian and international research on animal abuse in the context of IPV found the prevalence of family animal abuse in these contexts ranged between 12% and 89%. Cleary and colleagues (2021) noted that rates were influenced by definitions of animal abuse and by where study participants were recruited from (e.g. crisis accommodation, support services, broader populations). Furthermore, most research was focused on participants who had accessed IPV support services, and it is likely prevalence rates are an under-estimate as some victim-survivors may not feel they can safely disclose abuse or access support.

What violence against family animals looks like in an IPV context

When there is violence against family animals in an IPV context, dogs and cats are the most targeted. However, any family animal that the victim-survivor has a connection to can be at risk, including smaller (e.g. birds, fish) or larger² (e.g. horses) animals (Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018). Violence against family animals is often carried out in front of the victim-survivor and sometimes in front of children as well (Barrett et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2018; Jury et al., 2018).

Violence against family animals can take many forms, including but not limited to:

- threats of or actual physical or sexual abuse
- threats of or causing death
- verbal abuse
- deliberate neglect including not providing, or preventing others from providing, essential care such as food, water, shelter, grooming, basic medical needs and veterinary care (including for injuries inflicted by the perpetrator) (Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 2022; Jury et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Tiplady et al., 2018).

Violence against family animals in the context of IPV is usually perpetrated by males and affects female victim-survivors (Jury et al., 2018; Kaspiw et al., 2015; Lindsay, 2022). To date, research in this space has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of people in heterosexual relationships.³ The limited evidence available on the experiences of people of non-binary genders and diverse sexual orientations suggests that impacts of IPV-related violence against family animals are similar to those of victim-survivors from heterosexual relationships – however, this emerging research also suggests that LGBTIQ+ people may have unique or additional needs related to accessing support services (Riggs et al., 2018; Tiplady et al., 2018).

Why perpetrators use violence against family animals in an IPV context

This section summarises the research evidence on why perpetrators use violence against family animals in an IPV context. The findings are divided into 2 categories:

- violence against family animals intended to control the victim-survivor
- violence against family animals intended to control the animal.

² Most of the research focuses on violence against small to medium-sized family animals. Animal abuse in IPV contexts is also perpetrated against larger animals, including horses and farm animals/livestock. This presents unique barriers due to factors such as size and care needs (Giesbrecht, 2022). Addressing this specifically was outside the scope of this resource.

³ The Families in Australia Survey found that LGBTIQ+ participants were more likely than others to include pets as part of their family (Budinski & Gahan, 2023). This suggests that LGBTIQ+ victim-survivors who have family animals may be especially affected by violence against family animals.

To control the victim-survivor

Violence tends to be perpetrated against family animals with the intention of deliberately causing the victim-survivor of IPV emotional distress; to manipulate or force the victim-survivor to comply with the perpetrator's demands, including by demonstrating or threatening to demonstrate what might happen to the victim-survivor if they do not comply; or to punish the victim-survivor for not complying (Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Jury et al., 2018; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Newberry et al., 2017).

Perpetrators use this type of violence to control areas of the victim-survivor's life including, but not limited to:

- everyday activities (e.g. household chores and hobbies)
- finances (e.g. autonomy to access money for the household, family or personal purchases)
- social interactions (e.g. visiting friends or family)

(Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Jury et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2018; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022).

Perpetrators also use violence or threatened violence against family animals to:

- prevent victim-survivors from leaving the relationship with the perpetrator
- force the victim-survivor to return to the relationship
- force sexual interactions between the victim-survivor and perpetrator
- prevent the victim-surviving from disclosing their IPV experiences
- prevent the victim-survivor from accessing support

(Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2022; Jury et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2018; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Newberry, 2017).

In homes with multiple family animals, perpetrators commonly target the animal(s) for which the victim-survivor has the most affection (Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018). In this way, perpetrators leverage the emotional connections between victim-survivors and family animals and the victim-survivor's desire to protect their family animals (Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Tiplady et al., 2018). In addition to serving as a controlling function, perpetrators' violence against family animals can be in response to feeling jealous or threatened by the emotional connection between victim-survivors and family animals (Jury et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017). When children are involved, some perpetrators use violence against family animals to place pressure on the relationship between the victim-survivor and their children (e.g. by telling the child that the actions of the victim-survivor 'forced' the perpetrator to hurt the family animal; McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2018).

To control the family animal

The controlling behaviours perpetrators use with human victim-survivors (e.g. threatening or using violence to elicit compliance with the perpetrator's wishes) are sometimes also used towards the family animal. It is common for perpetrators of IPV to use physical violence or verbal abuse to try to prevent the family animal from performing certain behaviours or to punish them for certain behaviours. Examples include behaviours:

- that the perpetrator does not like, including 'typical' animal behaviours (e.g. barking or meowing, chewing, digging, jumping on furniture)
- that are typical of animal fear or trauma responses (e.g. cowering or hiding from the perpetrator, toileting inside)
- where the animal is protective of the victim-survivor (e.g. growling, biting or getting in the way when the perpetrator is abusing the victim-survivor)

(Collins et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; Newberry, 2017; Tiplady et al., 2018).

The perpetrator may not always actively intend to control or scare other people in the household when using violence against the family animal. However, regardless of this, other people in the home who have an emotional connection to the family animal are likely to become distressed and potentially afraid of the perpetrator. In this way, violence against animals can be considered a form of domestic and family violence, as recognised in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* (DSS, 2022), which includes animal abuse in the definition of coercive control perpetrated against women victim-survivors. Further research is required to provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics and the impacts for victim-survivors.

Impact of violence against family animals

This section summarises the key research evidence relating to the impact of violence against family animals in the context of IPV on 3 groups:

- victim-survivors
- children
- family animals.

Impact on women victim-survivors

This section focuses on the experiences of adult women victim-survivors. The following section looks at the experiences of children victim-survivors. Anticipated and actual violence against family animals negatively affects women victim-survivors' physical and psychological wellbeing and capacity to leave a violent relationship. Many victim-survivors report trying to protect the family animal by physically and/or verbally intervening to stop the perpetrator during a violent incident or hiding their animal if they expect violence. However, doing so may increase the risk of physical violence being directed towards the victim-survivor (Collins et al., 2018; Jury et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017). Emerging evidence suggests that perpetrators who use violence against family animals are also likely to be perpetrators of frequent and severe forms of IPV (Barrett et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2020).

For many victim-survivors, family animals are a source of comfort, friendship and support (Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Hageman et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017). Emotional bonds between victim-survivors and family animals who also experience violence sometimes intensify because of the shared experiences of violence (Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2015). Victim-survivors report a range of psychological impacts because of the violence against family animals including:

- anger, anxiety, fear, grief, sadness and stress
- conflict or confusion about the perpetrator exploiting the victim-survivor's emotional connection to the animal (e.g. wanting or needing the companionship and support the relationship with the family animal provides but the perpetrator leveraging this relationship as a reason to harm or threaten the family animal)
- guilt or shame for not being able to protect the family animal from the perpetrator, especially where the perpetrator has made the victim-survivor feel responsible for the violence
 - Victim-survivors who feel that their relationship with the family animal motivated the perpetrator's abuse may be especially vulnerable to psychological distress.
- loneliness or isolation because they are afraid to leave family animals with perpetrators to go to work or to visit family and friends

(Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Giesbrecht, 2022; Hawkins et al., 2022; Lindsay, 2022; Newberry, 2017).

Victim-survivors can experience separation from the family animal for a range of reasons, including the animal: (a) being left with the perpetrator if the victim-survivor has the capacity to leave the violent relationship but cannot take the family animal with them; (b) being rehomed or relinquished to a shelter for their safety and (c) being killed by the perpetrator. Each can lead to psychological distress (Barrett et al., 2017; Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022).

Victim-survivors are often the primary caretakers of family animals and worry about the risk of violence from the perpetrator in their absence, as well as the general care of their animals (Hageman et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018). Research evidence indicates that victim-survivors often stay in violent relationships, delay leaving or return to perpetrators because they have valid fears for the safety of the family animals and do not want to leave them behind (Barrett et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2021; Giesbrecht, 2022; Hageman et al., 2018; Jury et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Newberry, 2017; Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018; Wuerch et al., 2021). Victim-survivors who experience more severe IPV are often the most reluctant to leave family animals with the perpetrator due to the high risk of the family animal experiencing harm in their absence (Barrett et al., 2018). Violence against family animals may escalate when perpetrator demands for the victim-survivor to stay or return have not been met (Jury et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017; Tiplady et al., 2015).

There are several practical obstacles to victim-survivors being able to take family animals with them, with most relating to difficulties finding appropriate accommodation, accessing animal-inclusive support and managing

the financial costs related to caring for family animals (Collins et al., 2018; Jury et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017). In addition to fears for the safety of family animals, which may impact victim-survivors capacity to leave a violent relationship, separation from family animals also often means losing an important source of emotional support, friendship and kindness (Giesbrecht, 2022; Hageman et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Tiplady et al., 2015).

Impact on children victim-survivors

Living with IPV has a range of negative impacts on children's mental and physical health and wellbeing (Moss et al., 2023). In homes where there is violence against family animals, children may experience additional negative impacts (Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2016). Similar to adult victim-survivors, it is common for children to form strong, emotional connections with family animals and to feel comforted or calmed when spending time with them (Giesbrecht, 2022; Newberry, 2017). Because of this, exposure to violence against family animals can be potentially traumatic for children (Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2016) and may result in socio-emotional distress including anger, anxiety, fear, grief and stress (Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2016). Separation from family animals (e.g. due to leaving the perpetrator, rehoming the family animal or death of the family animal) can also cause socio-emotional distress in children (Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2018).

Children may also take proactive or preventative actions to try and protect family animals from perpetrators and, in doing so, put themselves at increased risk of abuse (McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017). Research examples include children hiding animals if they sense the perpetrator is in a state that increases the likelihood of them using violence (e.g. when the perpetrator is in a bad mood or under the influence of substances), cleaning up after animals to hide damage or toileting accidents that may lead to the perpetrator responding with violence, or physically trying to stop the perpetrator while the animal is being abused (McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017).

Violence against family animals can also affect relationships between children and the victim-survivor parent. For example, research has shown that perpetrators may say to children, or in front of children, that the actions of the victim-survivor have caused the perpetrator to be violent towards the family animals (Hawkins et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2015). Additionally, children may feel resentful towards the victim-survivor when separated from family animals, even if the family animal is in safe accommodation away from the perpetrator (Lindsay, 2022).

Impact on the family animal

The impacts of violence on family animals include:

- physical injuries, ill-health or death caused by physical and/or sexual abuse or neglect
- short- and/or long-term behavioural changes caused by verbal, physical or sexual abuse, including:
 - fear or distrust, particularly of men
 - increased defensive or protective behaviours, including aggression or avoidance
 - separation anxiety from the victim-survivor

(Cleary et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2018; Giesbrecht, 2022; Tiplady et al., 2018).

Additionally, the changes in behaviour and/or the health impacts experienced by family animals as a result of violence can make finding appropriate accommodation for the family animal more difficult (either with the victim-survivor or other safe housing away from the perpetrator) and create further obstacles for victim-survivors when considering or planning to leave a violent relationship (Tiplady et al. 2018).

How to support victim-survivors of IPV affected by violence against family animals

The practice considerations and recommendations in this section have been developed from a review of the findings of qualitative research with victim-survivors and practitioners in Australia and internationally and include:

- screening for experiences of violence against family animals
- support with safety planning.

Screening for experiences of violence against family animals

Identifying the presence of violence against family animals can help practitioners in child and family services assess levels of risk to victim-survivors and identify unique needs or barriers for victim-survivors accessing support or leaving a relationship (Collins et al., 2018; Hageman et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Newberry, 2017; Taylor et al., 2020; Wuerch et al., 2021).

Research indicates that many victim-survivors will not raise concerns about family animals without being asked directly. Some victim-survivors may feel ashamed of or embarrassed by what has happened to their animals or believe that their concerns will not be taken seriously and the support service won't recognise the importance and seriousness of the violence (Cleary et al., 2021; Hageman et al., 2018; Newberry, 2017).

Questions about family animals are often not included in intake or assessment protocols aimed at identifying domestic, family or sexual violence (Barrett et al., 2017; Giesbrecht, 2022). To overcome some of the barriers to victim-survivors reporting on violence against family animals, practitioners and service providers should consider the extent to which they are able to:

- include questions about family animals during intake and/or assessment (Giesbrecht, 2022; Hageman et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2020)
 - Where applicable, include questions about children's exposure to violence against family animals to identify children at increased risk of socio-emotional difficulties (McDonald et al., 2016).
- provide opportunities for victim-survivors to talk about violence directed towards their family animals and how this has affected them (Hageman et al., 2018)
- treat disclosures of violence against family animals with the same sensitivity and seriousness as disclosures of other forms of domestic, family and sexual violence (Collins et al., 2018; Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2020).

Support with animal-inclusive safety planning

Research evidence shows that violence against family animals is a significant barrier to victim-survivors accessing support, particularly when it comes to leaving a relationship (Barrett et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2021; Giesbrecht, 2022; Jury et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Newberry, 2017; Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018; Wuerch et al., 2021). Practitioners can help reduce these barriers by supporting victim-survivors with safety planning that considers the needs of family animals. For example:

- When planning the essential items the victim-survivor will need if they have to leave home at short notice for safety reasons include essential items for family animals. This may include food, medications, bowls, leashes and bedding. Paperwork that may be useful can include registration and vaccination certificates, vet invoices in the victim-survivor's name and care instructions for medical or behavioural needs (Hageman et al., 2018).
- Document details of threats or violence against family animals (Hageman et al., 2018).
- Discuss options for short- or long-term accommodation for family animals in case they are not able to stay with the victim-survivor (Giesbrecht, 2022). This might include planning if/how the victim-survivor will be able to visit or be updated on the family animal while they are in care, with consideration for the safety of both people and animals (Giesbrecht, 2022; Tiplady et al., 2018).
- Provide information or referrals to services that can assist with temporary care (e.g. fostering or short-term boarding, help with vet care; Hageman et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2020). For some suggestions of services refer to [Further reading and resources](#).

Strengthening systemic responses to violence against family animals in the context of IPV

The research literature relating to violence against family animals in the context of IPV has developed to the point where authors are able to suggest potential future directions for strengthening systemic responses. However,

there are significant practical and legal considerations with these types of strategies (Vincent et al., 2019) that make implementing them complex (refer further below). Directions discussed in this section include:

- improving access to crisis and support services that accommodate both human and animal needs
- strengthening relationships between IPV support services, animal welfare organisations and law enforcement.

Improving access to crisis and support services that accommodate both human and animal needs

Recommendations in the research literature consistently identify a need for more animal-inclusive services and shelters (Giesbrecht, 2022; Hageman et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2018). Accommodating family animals with victim-survivors removes a significant barrier to leaving violent relationships (i.e. fear of leaving family animals with perpetrators or of losing the emotional connection if they are rehomed or sheltered elsewhere) and supports the recovery of victim-survivors and family animals (Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2018). However, despite high rates of pet ownership and increasing awareness of the relationship between violence against family animals and IPV, very few crisis accommodation services can co-house family animals with victim-survivors (Hageman et al., 2018; Jury et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2022; Tiplady et al., 2015).

Services face challenges to implementation, particularly with funding and resources (Hageman et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Taylor et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2018). Other potential challenges include the health and safety requirements to have animals on the premises; resistance by service administration to moving towards animal-inclusive practice; and additional training needs for staff and specialist knowledge required to adequately care for animals who have experienced trauma (Taylor et al., 2020). These implementation challenges should be considered in future planning and policy making.

Strengthening relationships between IPV support services, animal welfare organisations and law enforcement

Another system-level recommendation consistently found in the literature is to strengthen relationships across IPV support service organisations, animal welfare organisations (e.g. animal shelters, protection societies and vets) and law enforcement agencies (Collins et al., 2018; Hageman et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018). Partnerships across systems could potentially improve the support provided to victim-survivors and animals by:

- improving access to accommodation for family animals when they cannot stay with the victim-survivor either temporarily or long-term (Collins et al., 2018; Giesbrecht, 2022; Tiplady et al., 2015; Tiplady et al., 2018)
 - It is important to note that animal shelters are often limited in their ability to help due to a lack of capacity and funding and often being staffed by volunteers (Giesbrecht, 2022; Hageman et al., 2018).
- providing options for affordable vet care and essential items (Giesbrecht, 2022)
- establishing mechanisms for early identification of risk, cross-referrals and shared case management across IPV services, vets and other animal welfare organisations and law enforcement (Giesbrecht, 2022; Hageman et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Many Australian households consider animals to be part of the family and it is common for people to form strong bonds with family animals. Research evidence shows a relationship between IPV and violence against family animals where, in the context of IPV, perpetrators may threaten, harm or kill family animals to force the victim-survivor to comply with the perpetrators demands and/or to cause emotional distress. There is some evidence that victim-survivors who experience IPV in homes where violence is also perpetrated against family animals may be at increased risk of frequent and severe IPV.

Violence against family animals negatively affects the physical and psychological wellbeing of victim-survivors, children and family animals. Violence against family animals also affects the victim-survivors capacity to leave a

violent relationship because of their fears for the safety of family animals if left behind and the practical obstacles to taking family animals with them.

A review of the research evidence to date has identified several recommendations to strengthen animal-inclusive support for victim-survivors at practitioner/service and systems levels. Key recommendations for practitioners to consider include: (a) screening for experiences of violence against family animals during intakes and assessments, and (b) considering the needs of family animals when supporting victim-survivors with safety planning.

The research literature also identifies directions for strengthening systemic responses, including improving access to animal-inclusive IPV crisis accommodation and strengthening collaborations between IPV support services, animal welfare organisations and law enforcement. At present, there are some practical and legal barriers to this.

Further reading and resources

AIFS resources

[Technology-facilitated coercive control](#)

This AIFS practice guide describes the research evidence on technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC).

[Reproductive coercion and abuse](#)

This AIFS practice guide describes the evidence on reproductive coercion and abuse (RCA). It covers: (a) what RCA is; (b) strategies used by perpetrators; (c) the impacts of experiencing RCA; (d) factors that influence a person's risk of experiencing RCA; and (e) how to ask about RCA victimisation. It also provides some tips for supporting clients who may be experiencing RCA.

[The power in understanding patterns of coercive control](#)

This AIFS webinar, presented in collaboration with ANROWS, explores ways that services can use the language of coercive control to support women to expose patterns of abusive behaviour.

[How to support clients exposed to technology-facilitated coercive control](#)

Drawing on the latest research and practitioner insights, this AIFS webinar: (a) describes what technology facilitated coercive control looks like in practice, (b) provides examples of ways that victim-survivors might experience technology-facilitated coercive control, and (c) suggests strategies for face-to-face and telehealth practice.

[What is family?](#)

This AIFS research report outlines the findings of the 2021 Families in Australia Survey and provides useful insights on aspects of Australian families.

Resources on family animals and intimate partner violence

[Animal abuse in the context of adult intimate partner violence](#)

This is a systematic review focused on violence against family animals in the context of IPV with a specific focus on the prevalence, motivations and impacts of animal abuse on victim-survivors of IPV.

[Companion-animal-inclusive domestic violence practice: Implications for service delivery and social work](#)

Based on an understanding of links between human-and animal-directed domestic violence, this article considers the importance of family animals in many people's lives, argues for companion-animal inclusive domestic violence service delivery, and reflects on challenges this presents to social work and human services.

RSPCA

The RSPCA has various state and territory based programs that broadly aim to offer practical support for victim-survivors leaving situations of domestic violence. These programs mainly offer safe temporary care for family animals, so that the victim-survivor knows the family animal is safe while they access support services for themselves.

[Project SAFE | RSPCA ACT](#)

[Community Domestic Violence Program | RSPCA NSW](#)

[Safe Beds Program | RSPCA Tas and Petbarn Foundation](#)

[Pets in crisis | RSPCA WA](#)

[Pets in Crisis Program | RSPCA Qld](#)

[Safe Kennels | RSPCA SA](#) This link includes an emergency checklist for pet safety that practitioners can use when safety planning with clients.

The RSPCA knowledgebase resource has information on [domestic violence and animal abuse](#), including a link where people can contact individual state or territory branches about support.

Other not for profits and charity services

[Lucy's Project](#)

Lucy's Project is a harm prevention charity focused on addressing domestic and family violence (DFV) in Australia and seeks to facilitate women and children's safety by reducing barriers to support and creating collaborative practices between human and animal services. This website includes Australia-wide resources to support DFV service providers, animal welfare agencies and community groups build capacity to support people with animals experiencing family violence.

[Pets of the Homeless Australia](#)

Pets of the Homeless (POTH) works with Victorian-based social service agencies to assist pets of people currently experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. POTH provides practical care in the form of material aid, veterinary care and emergency boarding.

[Safe House for Pets](#)

Safe House for Pets is a Victorian-based program created by Second Chance Animal Rescue to provide temporary care for at-risk animals whose owners are facing challenges as victim-survivors of domestic violence. The program aims to safely house and care for pets of victim-survivors, allowing them time to find safe refuge, with the aim of reuniting them with their pets as soon as possible.

[Safe Pets Safe Families](#)

Safe Pets Safe Families is a charity organisation, based in SA, that works with foster carers and boarding services to provide last resort crisis care and a range of programs to provide broader support services to vulnerable pet owners experiencing DFV including foster care and veterinary care. It also runs education programs for at-risk youths to reduce animal abuse and domestic violence.

[Support for Animal Lovers](#)

Meraki Social Work Services in WA was established to explore ways of supporting people and animals. Resources include 'The Power and Control Wheel of animal abuse and domestic violence', and links to support services and information.

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