

Animal hoarding and its effects on children: observations from a humane law enforcement professional

Article

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Abstract

Children raised in animal hoarding situations experience both short- and long-term physical and emotional hazards. Far too often, the needs of children are under-served due to lack of interagency cooperation, societal misperceptions and other mitigating factors. These issues are discussed as they relate to the effects of animal hoarding on children in the home. Content is drawn from the lifelong experience of a humane law enforcement and animal care professional. A sampling of case studies is offered, and observations are presented regarding the immediate and long-term risks and trauma experienced by children in the hands of people who hoard animals. Included are a universal definition of animal hoarding, an explanation of animal behaviour in hoarded homes, information about humane law enforcement agencies and problems associated with a lack of interagency cooperation.

Introduction

I am an Animal Care and Behaviour Consultant with a background in humane law enforcement, private and non-profit animal shelters and companion-animal rescue organisations. I also have a background in nuisance wildlife management and wildlife rehabilitation. My professional and voluntary work in animal welfare since the 1980s equips me with knowledge about intervention in animal-hoarded homes and the challenges concerning children within them. I am also the adult child of a hoarding parent and experienced growing up in a hoarded home. We had pets, but my hoarding parent did not hoard animals.

Over the years, I have interacted with many adult children of parents who hoarded both objects and animals. In these homes, animals were typically neglected, sometimes horribly so. The parents perceived themselves as ‘saving’ the animals even if food and water were scarce, unsanitary or unreliably available. I have found myself investigating dozens of cases of animal hoarding in which the children’s needs were not prioritised and they were forced to endure abhorrent conditions, and upwards of 200 cases in which reports of a smaller number of neglected animals revealed neglected children suffering alongside them in object-hoarded homes.

People who hoard animals usually come to the attention of law enforcement and public health professionals through a complaint lodged by a concerned neighbour or family member. The most common trigger for the complaint is odour, although occasionally a concerned neighbour reports visible dogs or cats in need of intervention. In both cases, when law enforcement and health officials investigate, we often see children hidden in the house, suffering invisibly and in silence.

Defining animal hoarding

Number of animals alone cannot define animal hoarding. Although many municipalities have ordinances or laws limiting the number of animals allowed per household, these numbers vary and do not focus on preventing animal hoarding or maltreatment. Historically, these laws were intended to keep people from operating breeding kennels for dogs and cats in residential areas.

A proper definition of animal hoarding must include more than the number of animals and should include overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, inadequate or unsanitary food and water, inadequate veterinary care, poor grooming, poor parasite control and a lack of awareness that any or all of these are unacceptable.

Overcrowding – Because object hoarding is usually present along with animal hoarding, objects occupy space needed by both animals and humans, further exacerbating overcrowding. Without special accommodations, such as proper use of professional kennel equipment, most dogs and cats will become severely stressed even in moderately overcrowded situations.

Unsanitary conditions include an accumulation of faeces, urine, vomitus, hair and other bodily effluents in litter boxes, kennels, transport crates and/or on floors and other surfaces,

including furniture, clothing, foodstuffs and other human belongings. Animals sometimes endure long-term confinement in cramped and filthy cages or kennels. Quite often, multiple layers of waste-soiled newspaper or cardboard are found on floors and other surfaces. Mounds and bags of relocated animal faeces are sometimes seen in the corners of these homes.

Inadequate or unsanitary food and water is seen in dirty water bowls, dirty food bowls, stale or spoiled food. There is often inadequate nutrition and/or unreliable food and water available.

Poor grooming of animals includes dirty, matted and/or unbathed fur, long nails, ingrown claws and the presence of parasites.

Inadequate veterinary care includes lack of required and suggested vaccinations and/or any or all of the following: poor overall health, low body weight, poor skin condition, discharge (from eyes, nose and other bodily orifices), untreated skin conditions and lack of parasite control (fleas, ticks, ear mites, intestinal worms, etc.). Some people who hoard animals provide sporadic veterinary care to some animals, but not others, or provide emergency care from time to time. Sometimes dead animals, recently deceased or carcasses, are present in the home.

Compromised or absent insight about the hazardous conditions that harm people and animals is common in people who hoard animals. Even when somewhat aware, they believe that no person or law can tell them what to do with their animals.

While any of the above circumstances might merit investigation for animal neglect or cruelty, all or nearly all must be present for a case to be classified as animal hoarding. Responsible dog or cat caretakers or breeders will provide proper care even if the animals are large in number. Alternately, a person who hoards animals can have a small number of them packed into a small space in hazardous conditions and have low to no insight into how they are harmed.

How do these residences become permeated with filth?

Most companion animals want to distance themselves from their faeces, particularly cats. In the wild, the odour of a bowel movement might draw in a larger predator. A normal instinct for many species of animals is to protect themselves from predators by obscuring or burying faeces. In a normal home, dogs are trained to relieve themselves outdoors, and indoor accidents are promptly cleaned up. Likewise, responsible owners provide cats with litter boxes which the owner keeps clean, whether the cat is a full-time indoor or an inside-outside cat.

Proper management of animals is highly unusual in hoarded homes. With few exceptions, people who hoard animals rarely allow a dog outdoors. Cat litter boxes, if present at all, are not kept clean. When furnishings are covered in piles of hoarded objects, stressed animals will scent-mark these. When owners move scent-marked objects, or heap more objects on top of the marked ones, the animal must make new marks. The animal is then likely to use urine for a lasting territorial mark. Animals with no choice but to walk through waste on the floor will also track it wherever they go, including children's beds. Sometimes bathtubs and showers become a place for animals to discard waste. A non-professional outsider might perceive this as the animals' wanton misbehaviour and not as a highly stressful situation for both helpless creatures and children.

Imagine children living in these conditions, without a clean surface upon which to sit, eat, do homework, sleep or relax. People

legally responsible for animal abuse can go to prison, whereas the law often holds parental rights above children's rights when the matter is considered one of child welfare. Children are often left in these hoarded homes or returned to the abusive parents after minimum efforts to comply with child protective services (CPS). I have witnessed many neglected children living in filthy homes crowded with neglected animals, homes in which every available surface is covered in junk and everything in sight, including human beds, was encrusted in faeces and soaked in urine.

Proper reporting of animal hoarding

It is essential to contact an agency responsible for humane law enforcement. Private humane societies are usually limited to providing adoption services and do not have law enforcement powers. When a private humane society cannot assist because they lack legal authority, concerned persons often stop seeking help. If a humane law enforcement agency is not contacted, neither the animals nor the children can be helped. When in doubt, contact your local government for direction.

A governmental humane law enforcement agency is available in most municipalities under varying agency titles such as 'Animal Control'. They have the power to seize animals at risk and, if they can be saved, will provide proper care until judgements can be made. When small municipalities lack such an animal control agency, enforcement of animal cruelty laws is allocated to the police or sheriff. In these cases, a private or non-profit humane society is sometimes enlisted to assist with care until a court date.

Cases from the field

I have chosen a few examples indicative of how children become invisible in cases of animal hoarding, and how they are affected in the long term. Most cases were chosen because they are typical, not exceptional.

Brenda was a serial hoarder of animals in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Brenda's pattern was to rent a cheap house from an absentee landlord in a marginal neighbourhood. She would fill it to the brim with any dog and cat she could gather from the streets. Every few years, she came to our agency's attention. The neglected animals would be confiscated, those healthy enough would be rehabilitated and suffering animals beyond help would be humanely euthanised. Brenda would then disappear for a few years until a neighbour somewhere else in town complained of noise and odour.

Brenda had a daughter living in these hoards. Each time, the child would go into foster care until Brenda showed CPS her new, clean rental and proof of attending a parenting skills class. Each time, her daughter was returned to her and she proceeded to hoard again. In the last interaction I had with Brenda, she lived with her daughter, Jane, and 47 dogs and 72 cats in a two-bedroom, single-storey rental house in a student neighbourhood. We used hazmat gear to enter the house and pulled out drywall to retrieve cats that climbed through holes to get inside walls. An accumulation of 'poop lasagna' (layers of soiled newspaper and cardboard) was knee-deep throughout the home. Human beds were encrusted with faeces. This home was so damaged that it had to be bulldozed. As in previous cases, some animals had tags identifying their owners, but Brenda had not contacted them, believing that 'a good owner wouldn't have let them get out'.

Each time Brenda was prosecuted for animal cruelty, the legal system failed by slapping her on the wrist (fines, but no jail time). There was little impetus for her to change. Each time, the same

system critically failed her daughter. Brenda knew exactly how to convince others that she had changed and was able to get her daughter back. Jane was repeatedly subjected to new houses that became hoarded until she was old enough to choose housing with a relative. As an adult, Jane suffered from asthma and other lung issues which her physicians connected with living among mould, faeces and the powerful chemical effects of ammonia from urine. Brenda later turned up hoarding animals in another county.

Jane, who grew up to volunteer with humane societies and animal rescue groups, expressed how the situation was for her, saying: ‘... because I carry so much guilt. I was afraid to speak out when I was a child because I feared both that my mother would go to jail and I would be alone in the world, and that all the animals would be taken away and maybe killed, so I didn’t do anything. It took me a long time and a lot of therapy to realize that I was beating myself up for failing to take adult responsibility when I was a child. I beat myself up thinking of those people crying over their lost dog or cat, people I should have called because their number was on the tag, but I was afraid of my mother’s reaction. Still, as an adult, I have such a strong need to make up for what my mother did. That’s why I volunteer for animal shelters’.

The ‘Cheerios Kids’: In 2002, I investigated a case in which neighbours were concerned because they saw a couple of thin Chihuahuas in the yard of what seemed to be an abandoned home. Neighbours advised that no one had visited the home for at least a week. Upon investigation, a 7-year-old boy and 5-year-old girl were found to have been abandoned, sharing a run-down mobile home with eight Chihuahuas who ran in and out through a hole in the door. Although this was not an alarming number of animals at first glance, the tiny single-bedroom trailer was so packed with garbage and junk that conditions were severely unsanitary and overcrowded for humans and animals alike. Although it was wintertime, electricity and heat had been disconnected. Running water was still available.

Upon gently questioning the children (with CPS approval and supervision), we learned that the parents had simply packed a car and gone away, leaving behind a few boxes of Cheerios, some potato chips and a small amount of dog food. The children shared their limited supply of Cheerios with the dogs. They said that they did not reach out to neighbours because their parents had prevented them from going outside or talking to them, or strangers. Further investigation revealed that the children and dogs had been abandoned for about 2 weeks.

None of the neighbours knew that children were present in the home. The effects of the parents controlling the children with fear and manipulation endured even after the parents were long gone. The children screamed and cried horribly when foster care arrived, not wanting to be separated from the dogs. The children were placed with their grandmother and, with the help of a friend who worked for CPS, I kept track of their case. I was able to reassure the children that the dogs seemed healthy enough, aside from being very thin, and would not be euthanised. I promised that we would let them know about the good homes the dogs were going to.

The dogs received much-needed veterinary care and were placed with good caretakers who sent me letters and photos of the dogs so the kids would know that the dogs were safe. I forwarded these to the children through my friend at CPS. I hasten to point out that this level of follow-up is rarely possible with over-worked agencies, but I was able to coordinate these efforts on my own through my friend in CPS. The grandmother who was able to take the children’s two favourite dogs contacted our agency on

occasion over the next few years. I learned that both children suffered from night terrors, insomnia, depression and severe anxiety and were receiving ongoing therapy. Both children became extremely protective of the two dogs they had and did not trust visitors who wanted to interact with them.

A Bone-thin dog chained to the porch of an urban home prompted a neighbour to call Animal Care and Control to report a case of abuse. ‘I can see its ribs, and it’s covered in fleas’, said the complainant. ‘They have other dogs in the backyard, but they have a tall wooden fence, so I don’t know how many’. We saw the flea-bitten pit bull chained to the front porch. A pregnant teenager in dirty clothing was inside. As I asked her if an adult was home, a late-age baby and a toddler ran up to her. Both were grimy and wore nothing but heavily laden diapers. Through the partly opened door, I could see the room was stacked with boxes and plastic bins. Only a narrow path led further into the home. An angry pit bull emerged from this mess, and the girl slammed the door before it could reach me.

In this case, the adults present in the home refused to speak to either Animal Care and Control or CPS, so a warrant and police backup was necessary just to begin an investigation. Over 40 pit bulls were found mainly in the small yard. Although most pit bulls are not aggressive to humans, these were. Five children ranging in age from a mobile baby to the pregnant teen were living in that home. The younger children were terrified of the yard-dogs and only interacted with the half-dozen dogs living in the densely hoarded house. Only narrow paths were available to a couch and a couple of beds in other rooms, and the home reeked of both dog faeces and urine. All the dogs were impounded, and CPS took the children to foster homes. Through my friend at CPS who worked this case, I learned that all the children had respiratory health issues, fear and anxiety issues and were found to be in an overall poor condition, yet they were returned when the parents met the basic requirements of social services.

Billy was an 8-year-old boy found living in an animal hoard along with a 4-year-old brother. In this case, dozens of cats and dogs were found living in a two-storey, four-bedroom home after neighbours complained of the odour. The stench was so intense that it travelled across the large suburban lot, across the neighbours’ equally large yards and into their homes. A neighbour’s complaint brought our agency to the door and, as soon as we were aware that children were present, I contacted CPS. The home was filled to the brim with stacked boxes of hoarded items. All surfaces in the home were contaminated by animal waste, living and dead insects, and other filth. Both parents were professionals – one, an attorney.

As in most cases, these boys were traumatised by the animals being taken away to the shelter. After their copious tears and shrieking were comforted by our promise to do our best to get them into forever homes, the older boy looked squarely at me and asked, ‘Do me and my brother get forever homes, too?’ I will never forget that. Both children looked pale and sickly, and I overheard the older boy tell the CPS worker that he had asthma and needed to get his inhaler. The neighbours saw us donned in hazmat suits as we entered the hazardous home but seemed more focused on the odour than on the young children and neglected animals who lived there.

Maria, an elderly woman who hoarded animals, was brought to our attention by a Meals on Wheels delivery worker concerned about the conditions in plain view when Maria opened her door. Our agency found more than 30 neglected cats crowded into a single-bedroom apartment heaped with junk and garbage and

overrun with roaches and other vermin. Maria was taken into protective custody by Adult Protective Services (APS), and our agency researched family contacts to complete our task of rescuing the animals. In the course of contacting adult children, we learned that they had grown up crowded into one apartment after another with dozens of cats and dogs and had cut off contact with their mother years previously. Both of these adults mentioned that they had been in therapy for many years and were heartbroken that their mother's home was never safe enough for the grandchildren to go there.

Each of these cases reveals how children become invisible and overlooked in these dire situations. They are trapped in a hoard and would never receive attention if it was not for outsiders who notice odours or neglected animals. Animal cruelty laws and investigative agencies for animal welfare bring attention to children through contact with CPS. Sadly, children are usually returned to their parents, who continually subject them to suffering.

Effects on minor and adult children raised in animal-hoarded homes by hoarding parents

Scores of times, I observed children and animals in abhorrent conditions in hoarded homes. My observations in the field, as well as my many interactions with adult children of hoarding parents (COHP) through websites and support groups, led me to the following observations.

Children often feel that the outside world cares more about animals than about them. I have heard this over and over from adult COHP, and sometimes from young children. Most people are much more willing to call a humane law enforcement agency than CPS, largely because our cultural inclination is to believe that people's child-rearing practices are 'their own business'. People also know that it is easier to get animals to safety than it is to remove children from a home.

Adult COHP report they felt non-existent. Many report feelings along the lines of 'when the officers came for our dogs and cats, no one spoke to me. I felt invisible'. Children do not understand that humane law enforcement personnel cannot legally interact with them without them having a present and proper representative, such as a CPS staff member. More often than not, that representation is rarely present at the same time the animal cruelty situation is being investigated. Children see animals removed and getting new, clean, safe homes while they are returned to, or remain in, their parents' homes that get overridden with filth and animals again.

Children often are not believed. People who lack awareness of hoarding disorder and never see the home often fail to understand how conditions get as bad as children report. Relatives often respond to children's complaints about the house by telling them to help their parents clean up, saying they should not complain when they have food to eat and a roof over their heads. When children from hoarded homes with animal hoarding reach out – just as with sexual abuse, physical abuse and alcoholism – they often are not believed or thought to be wildly exaggerating the extent of the filth or the number and conditions of animals in their homes. Often, their parents punish them or restrict contact with others.

Children are in physical danger. Aside from the obvious dangers presented by pathogens, faeces, urine and other bodily effluents, neglected and unvaccinated animals can carry parasites, such as fleas and ticks, which can be transmitted to humans, as well as zoonotic diseases. Rodents, roaches and flies are usually present as well, carrying a plethora of pathogens. Highly stressed and often unsocialised animals can also present dangers ranging from an infection caused by a serious scratch to dangerous bites, mutilation

and even potential death from aggressive dogs. Because pets require a significant amount of time invested in each animal to be properly socialised with humans, socialisation is difficult, if not impossible, when large numbers of animals are present.

Unsocialised animals are far more likely to bite or attack, especially when stressed by poor health and overcrowded living conditions. Other types of animals can present danger as well. I have been in the home of a person hoarding reptiles who had dozens of venomous snakes in flimsy cages in a home where small children were present. CPS returned the children after the snakes were removed. The couple turned up again in another county, with more venomous snakes in the same home with the children.

Many COHP speak of ailments related to animal hoarding, such as skin rashes and infections. Other childhood ailments, such as asthma and allergies, attributed to long-term exposure to mould, bacteria and highly concentrated ammonia from urine, continue into adult years.

Children are in emotional danger. Commonly, children and adult COHP report feeling less important than the animals (as well as the junk) in their homes. In the words of one adult survivor: 'Not only did I feel less important than the poor dogs at our house, I felt less important than the shit-stained trash that my mother refused to throw away'. Many adult COHP doubt their own ability to provide love and care for pets. I have an underlying concern that some children could resent animals and grow up to harm them. A child's ability to love animals may permanently be compromised by the association they make with the relentless filth in which they were raised. Adult COHP report nagging feelings, such as, 'I could never hurt a dog or cat, but I can't stand to be around them, however sweet and nice and clean they are, after what I lived through'. On the other hand, some adult COHP want to devote themselves to properly caring for animals, realising that they need care and can be meaningful sources of comfort and pleasure.

Children living in an animal hoard fear that speaking up will get animals killed or spark parental reactions such as rage, despair and punishment. These children also fear being taken from their parents and the only home they know. Children fear that the animals will be killed because they are viewed as 'bad' or 'not good enough'. Children are also terrified that they will be blamed for animal neglect and the home conditions. Why did they not act to make things better? This causes children to live with fear, guilt and shame.

There is little interagency coordination. As humane law enforcement agents, we face stumbling blocks to interfacing with CPS or APS. Humane law enforcement officers are mandated reporters, so when investigating animal abuse, we are required to report that children are in the home and report any clear evidence of other illegal activity to appropriate agencies. We must stay at the scene until CPS staff arrive, but we cannot speak to minors unless CPS authorises us to do so. Some leeway in speaking to children while we wait for CPS would go a long way to making them feel like they are important in these situations.

Children do not easily trust that all the animals will be rehomed and are distressed when the fate of the animals with which they have lived is unknown to them. Children deserve the truth, delivered in the kindest terms and with the best explanation for their age level. I should note that I never tell children that an animal has been 'put to sleep', out of concern that the child may fear dying if he or she falls asleep, and then develop sleep problems. I always tell them what 'euthanasia' means – along the lines of, 'it's a big word, and it means that we give them medicine to make them fall asleep, and then, while they are asleep, we give them another drug that lets them die without any pain. We only do this if an animal is

very sick and they can't get better, and we only do it so they aren't suffering and hurting'.

Quite often, foster caregivers of the affected children in an animal hoarding situation wish to reunite the children with at least one of the animals from the hoarded home, but the necessary wall of protective secrecy does not allow helpful outsiders to communicate about such matters with CPS. Also, many helpful actions for the children would require a coordination of resources between CPS and a humane agency. And it is rare for overworked humane officers or CPS agents to act as a go-between to give these children the simple reassurance that, whenever possible, the animals were adopted into responsible homes. Accurate and shared information from all responding agencies can facilitate a child's need to work through the trauma of the dramatic hoarding intervention. Mental health workers could use information about the status of the animals, jurisdiction regarding child custody and expected life circumstances to guide therapy.

A universal definition of animal hoarding could be shared by all involved agents so that appropriate action can be taken, especially regarding repeated cycles of hoarding. Number limits alone allow a legal number of animals to be returned to the hoarding individual, who usually chooses favourites up to the maximum number allowed and then hoarding resumes. Perhaps, laws and ordinances could be enacted to distinguish between animal hoarding cases and ordinary people in possession of a few too many pets without a kennel license. A law enforcement agency could require that inspection for proper care is provided, and perhaps allowing

people who hoard animals fewer pets than the standard ordinance, or no pets at all would be in order. Their homes should be regularly monitored by an animal protection agency and, if children are housed there, by CPS as well.

These parents are skilled at subterfuge, gaslighting social services, judges and CPS, and, when exonerated, they quickly resume creating a dangerous home. Children are traumatised repeatedly when they return to parents who continue to hoard and harm animals. In summary, all agencies need to share knowledge and ascribe to common definitions so that coordinated intervention and long-term follow-up can reduce the trauma that produces long-term physical and emotional scars.

Author details

Dez Crawford has been active across a range of roles and continues to hold Board of Directors memberships for a number of small humane organisations. Her other roles have included: operations director for the Louisiana SPCA in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; former assistant director, East Baton Rouge Parish Animal Care and Control; former president and former vice-president, Louisiana Animal Control Association; consultant for A&E 'Hoarders' in 2008 Baton Rouge case; former president, Louisiana Herpetological Society; former board of directors, Capitol Area Animal Welfare Society; former wildlife rehabilitator; nuisance wildlife management specialist.

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