

# Arrest and Prosecution of Animal Sex Abuse (Bestiality) Offenders in the United States, 1975–2015

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Bestiality is an uncomfortable topic about which there is limited scientific literature. Prevalence research has focused on self-reported acts, and no research has established the actual frequency and nature of deliberate sex acts with animals. This quantitative, descriptive study examined 456 arrests for bestiality-related incidents in the United States from 1975 to 2015 to explore patterns of offending, offender characteristics, and how cases were adjudicated. The results suggest that animal sex offending may be linked to other criminal behavior, and involves a spectrum of sexual acts, including coercive, violent, and non-violent penetration; solicitation for sex with animals; and deviant behavior including torture and necrophilia. Findings of concern were that 31.6% of animal sex offenders also sexually offended against children and adults; 52.9% had a prior or subsequent criminal record involving human sexual abuse, animal abuse, interpersonal violence, substances, or property offenses; and only 39.1% of arrests involving the direct sexual abuse of animals resulted in prosecution. The broad range of sexual assault patterns and varied legal outcomes suggest that bestiality is more pervasive and more serious than previously thought and point to a need for additional research to aid in detection, intervention, sentencing, treatment, and supervision methods.

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Although there is evidence that zoophilia and bestiality have existed for millennia,<sup>1</sup> we still do not have reliable information on the prevalence of the behavior or what significance it might have. Academic research and reliable statistics are scant largely because zoophilia (i.e., the human sexual interest in or attraction to an animal) and bestiality (i.e., the deliberate use of animals for human sexual purposes) are generally considered rare and unworthy of serious research or debate.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, reports of animal cruelty are often perceived as less important to investigate or prosecute.<sup>3</sup> As a result, zoophilia and bestiality are understudied, and usable statistics are artificially low or not available at all. The primary goal of this study was to create a baseline of reliable and verifiable data through a detailed examination of 456 bestiality-related arrests that occurred in the United States over a 40-year period.

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## Literature Review

### *Estimates of Prevalence*

It is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the number of people who are sexually interested in animals or who have acted on that interest. Bestiality, a deliberate sex act between a human and an animal (also referred to as animal sexual abuse) has seldom been studied directly or exclusively, and data have not been consistently collected or reported. Animal control agencies and shelters are not required to report statistics on seized or surrendered animals. Veterinarians in most states are not required to report suspected animal sexual abuse to social services or law enforcement.<sup>4</sup> Law enforcement agencies are not required to report statistics on criminal acts involving animals. In 2015, the Federal Bureau of Investigation modified the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) to encourage law enforcement agencies to voluntarily report animal cruelty and sexual abuse as criminal activity occurring in their jurisdictions. Currently, about one third of such enforcement agencies across the country use NIBRS to report these statistics.<sup>5</sup>

### General Population Studies

Existing literature on the prevalence of sex acts between humans and animals is largely outdated, and results have been inconsistent. Three studies published between 1948 and 1974 found an average of 6.5 percent of men and 2.8 percent of women self-reported at least one sexual encounter with an animal.<sup>6-8</sup> In a more recent study, researchers found that, among 1,040 men and women surveyed, at least a third had acted on an atypical sexual interest like pedophilia. Zoophilia was not measured separately, but it was included in a category called "Other behavior," which considered whether the person had ever been "aroused by an animal, fecal matter, enema, urine, cadavers, or other unusual things" (Ref. 9, p 165). Less than 1 percent expressed an interest in this broad category.

### Prison Inmates and Sex Offender Studies

In the 1960s, a team of researchers compared incarcerated males, convicted male sex offenders, and a control group of non-incarcerated males on various measures. The overall finding was that, among the 2,715 people studied, 17.7 percent of the sex offenders, 14.7 percent of the prison inmates, and 8 percent of the control group reported having committed sex acts with animals.<sup>10</sup> Nearly forty years passed before convicted sex offenders were once again studied regarding their sexual contact with animals, when three studies were published between 2003 and 2008.<sup>11-13</sup> On average, 43 percent of offenders in these studies reported sex acts with animals, which is considerably higher than previously reported.

### Sexual Coercion Studies

Sexual coercion is an often overlooked phenomenon related to bestiality. Two studies, however, at least mention such incidents. In the late 1970s, researchers interviewed a group of 400 battered women and reported that 41 percent of the participants said they had been asked by their batterer to perform "unusual sex acts" such as being forced to insert objects in their vagina, engage in group sex, participate in bondage/sadomasochistic acts, or have sex with animals. These acts were not measured individually.<sup>14</sup> In 1990, a case study described a woman who, as a child, had been molested by her father, who also "involved the dog in various acts of bestiality" (Ref. 15, p 219).

## Offender Characteristics

### Demographics

Studies published between 2002 and 2016<sup>1,16,17</sup> indicated that most individuals who self-reported having sex with animals were white males ranging in age from 16 to 78 years, most of whom were gainfully employed and were, or had been, in an intimate human relationship. Animals most often chosen as sexual partners were dogs, horses, goats, cats, farm animals, and fowl, followed by wildlife and exotics.

### Criminal History

Although there have been no studies focused exclusively on sex offenses with animals, prior research has found that people convicted of animal cruelty commit myriad crimes. A 1999 study found that animal abusers were more than three times more likely to have a criminal history involving property, drug, public disorder, and interpersonal violence offenses than people who had not committed animal cruelty offenses.<sup>18</sup> In a more recent study, most animal cruelty offenders studied had been arrested previously for human sexual assault, weapons possession, and fraud, in addition to crimes involving property, drugs, and interpersonal violence.<sup>17</sup>

### Mental and Physical Health

Zoophilia is a form of paraphilia, or atypical sexual interest, characterized by a recurring, long-lasting, intense, and sometimes preferential sexual attraction to animals<sup>19,20</sup> It is rarely diagnosed as a primary mental health disorder, however, because it is often secondary to or coincident with another paraphilia, disorder, or disease process.<sup>21,22</sup> Zoophilia has also been associated with medical conditions such as brain aneurysm,<sup>23</sup> neurological disorders (particularly in patients receiving dopamine treatment associated with Parkinson's disease),<sup>24-26</sup> and psychosis.<sup>27</sup>

## Criminal and Antisocial Behavior

### Animal Cruelty and Interpersonal Violence

Although the number of studies is small and the results inconclusive, bestiality has been linked to animal cruelty, interpersonal violence, and sexual homicide. In a review of childhood histories of 30 sexual murderers, killers who had been sexually abused themselves reported higher rates of animal cruelty overall, as well as higher rates of bestiality specifically.<sup>28</sup> In a study of 299 inmates convicted of per-

son, non-person, and drug-related crimes, researchers who considered the effect of severe childhood discipline or abuse or childhood exposure to animal cruelty (including bestiality) on the types of crimes for which the inmates were convicted found an association between punitive childhood histories and antisocial behavior.<sup>29</sup> Inmates who reported witnessing or participating in acts of animal cruelty were asked follow-up questions regarding the number of animals involved, what was done, who engaged in the acts, and the age of the inmate at the time. No similar questions were asked of the 11 percent of inmates ( $n = 33$ ) reporting animal sexual abuse.<sup>29</sup> In 2008, researchers revisited an earlier study of 261 inmates from three different prisons and noted that inmates who had choked animals as children were more likely to have also committed bestiality.<sup>30</sup>

#### Human Sexual Offending

In at least three studies, sexual offending against animals has been associated with human sexual offending. In 1995, the Abel Assessment for Sexual Interest was developed as a tool for measuring sexual deviance in adults and juveniles. At a 2009 conference on child molestation research and prevention, Gene Abel and his colleagues presented findings based on results accumulated from assessments administered over a number of years by 500 clinics across North America. Across 44,202 assessments of adult males being evaluated for sexual misconduct, 28 percent had committed a sexual offense against a child, and 5 percent reported a sexual interest in bestiality. Among the child sex offenders, when compared with other reported behaviors such as exhibitionism, frotteurism, and pornography use, bestiality was found to be the single largest factor in predicting increased risk to molest a child, particularly if sexual contact or interest in animals began at an earlier age.<sup>31</sup> In one study of 84 forensically committed child sex offenders, 3.6 percent admitted to a history of bestiality.<sup>32</sup> In a 2016 study of 150 adult animal cruelty offenders, 12 men arrested for animal sexual abuse had also committed human sexual assault; more than half of their victims were under the age of 18.<sup>17</sup>

#### Animal and Child Pornography

There is some evidence that people drawn to child pornography may also possess or view animal pornography (i.e., images depicting an animal being sexually abused). In studies of incarcerated offenders,

researchers reported that 15 to 29 percent of the inmates had viewed both animal and child pornography.<sup>33,34</sup> Although little is known about people who create, disseminate, exchange, sell, or purchase animal pornography, some information can be gleaned from a study of adult male child pornography offenders released to community supervision, where researchers found 15 percent of the subjects collected animal pornography within five years of release.<sup>35</sup> One form of animal and child pornography that often goes unnoticed is pornographic anime, a style of Japanese film and television animation also found in a book form called manga. Anime depictions and stories frequently feature child-like or animal-like characters in everyday or fantasy situations (for example, Pokémon or My Little Pony). Hentai is a controversial form of anime that, loosely translated, means perverted or perverse sexual desire, and most often depicts anime characters in situations of sexual violence and rape. A somewhat familiar example of hentai is a circa 1814 woodcut, often called “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife,” by Katsushika Hokusai that depicts a woman receiving oral pleasure from two octopuses.

A recently emerging form of sexually motivated animal cruelty is zoosadism or animal torture pornography, sometimes referred to as “crush” or “squish” porn. Crushing is a paraphilia in which a person is aroused either by committing or watching the crushing of small objects (like crackers) or small animals (like kittens or rabbits). Crush videos are specifically illegal under U.S. Federal law 18 U.S.C. 48,<sup>36</sup> but the extent of the behavior is unknown, and only one such case has been successfully tried in the United States thus far.<sup>37</sup>

#### Animal Sex Abuse and the Law

Currently, there is no specific federal law prohibiting sex acts between humans and animals; however, nearly every U.S. state has criminalized bestiality in some form. The definition of what constitutes a prohibited act and how offenders should be punished or monitored varies considerably from state to state. As an example, 15 states refer to sex acts with animals as “bestiality,” 11 refer to bestiality as “sexual assault or misconduct,” 10 consider it a “crime against nature,” and “buggery/sodomy” is still used by South Carolina and Kansas. Sentencing guidelines also vary: a single incident of bestiality could result in a six-month incarceration in California or five years of

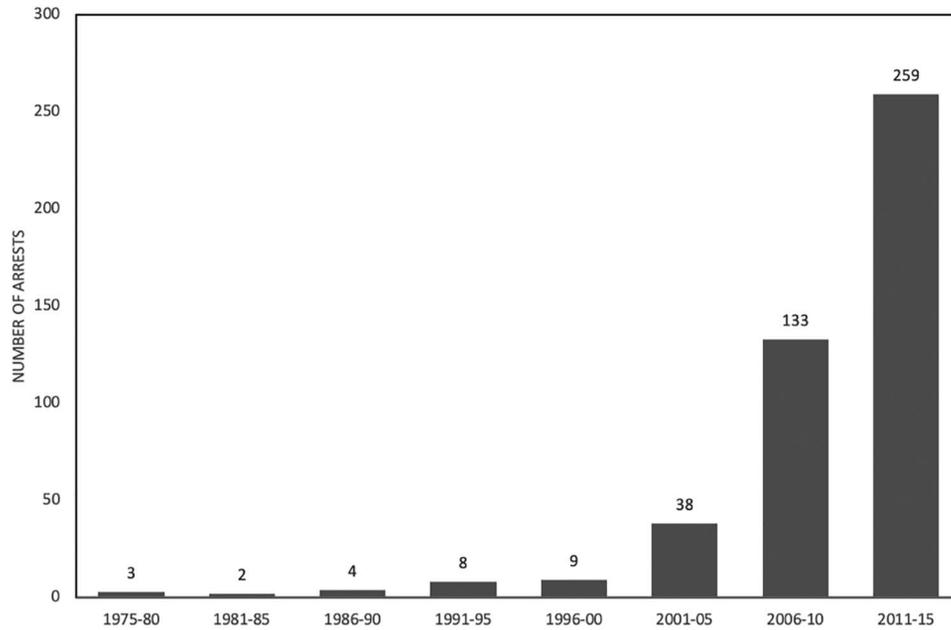
hard labor in Louisiana.<sup>38</sup> In about half of U.S. states, a violation of the bestiality law can result in placement on a sex-offender registry; however, the use of sex-offender registries for sexual crimes involving animals is still in its infancy, and at least two convictions have been overturned.<sup>39,40</sup> Pornography depicting animals is not considered illegal under federal or state law unless it meets the criteria of the Miller Test, which essentially determines whether the images or material have any artistic or other value and would otherwise be considered lewd, filthy, or disgusting to the average person.<sup>41</sup>

### Methods and Data

The goal of this research was to document the nature and number of bestiality arrests in the United States over an extended period to create a platform for future research. Due to the overall limited number of bestiality-related arrests reported, criteria for inclusion was defined broadly to include every arrest in the United States from 1950 forward that involved deliberate sexual contact with an animal; assistance, filming, or coercion of another person to commit a sex act with an animal; solicitation or advertising for sex with an animal; or production, possession, or sharing any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a person and an animal. Information collected included offender demographics (i.e., age, gender, marital status, children, race, employment) and criminal history, victim characteristics (i.e., age, gender, relationship to offender, and level of sexual contact with offender), offense characteristics (i.e., description, location, year of arrest, co-defendants, and reporting party), and certain elements of the adjudication process (i.e., charge at arrest, charge at conviction, resolution, and appeals). Approval by an ethics committee or institutional review board was not sought for this research because the study is a retrospective review of bestiality-related incidents occurring over a 40-year period, according to information retrieved from publicly available sources. No individual subjects were interviewed, and no names were used in the presentation of data or findings. It should also be noted that animals are not protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which, among other provisions, protects the privacy of a person's health records. In no case was data obtained or recorded that could be considered protected health information.

Prior to this study, no collection of data on arrests for animal sexual abuse or exploitation existed; therefore, data had to be built using a case-study approach. The most accurate, reliable, and relevant information was collected from multiple sources, including, but not limited to, extant media reports that were typically available online from local news services (142 cases), criminal background research services such as Intellius.com and Truthfinder.com (114 cases), arrest reports and court records available online or by written request (95 cases), court of appeals opinions and decisions available online or through services such as Westlaw (82 cases), and Internet queries using search terms such as bestiality, crime against nature, and sodomy+animal (23 cases). Whenever possible, records from one source were verified or expanded by reviewing records from another source. For example, media reports were verified through court records; criminal background information was expanded by reading multiple media reports or other sources to confirm dates and circumstances of the arrest. Information on 23 incidents was expanded through communication with individuals who had direct knowledge of the case (e.g., an arresting officer, an animal control officer, a prosecutor, an owner of an abused animal, a veterinarian, or an animal shelter worker). Information obtained from anonymous or unnamed sources was not used directly in the study but aided in the author's understanding of some incidents. Thirty-seven arrests could not be verified through additional sources, most often due to sealed or redacted records or the age of the incident.

Data collection methods resulted in an initial dataset of 472 bestiality-related arrests between 1953 and 2015. Two arrests, from 1953 and 1970, were excluded for lack of detail, as were three arrests for false charges; these exclusions would not likely have affected study results. Eleven juvenile offenders (i.e., 12–17 years old) were excluded for legal and privacy reasons. The resulting dataset consisted of 456 adult offenders. Descriptive information was entered in a customized electronic database along with any associated documents or images. Diagnosis or reference to any form of fetish or paraphilia, as well as alleged or suspected prior acts of bestiality not resulting in arrest were noted in the offender's background or criminal record. The phrase "had sex with" was used in some source records to indicate that a sex act with



**Figure 1.** Bestiality-related arrests in the United States, 1975–2015.

an animal had occurred, but the type of contact was not specifically described. For purposes of frequency reporting, “had sex with” was tracked separately but was included in overall statistics related to direct sex acts with animals. Incidents in which an identified animal or person was sexually abused or victimized were tracked separately from incidents involving pornographic images of unidentified animals or people. Data for each variable were converted to numeric codes for frequency counts and simple comparative analysis using Microsoft Excel.

## Results

### **Animal Sexual Abuse Occurred Across the U.S.**

Arrests for bestiality-related incidents were reported throughout most of the United States between 1975 and 2015. There was no record of arrests in Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, or the District of Columbia. The annual number of arrests was minimal between 1975 and 2001 (1–2 per year), but this began rising sharply in 2004, peaking at 259 arrests during the period of 2011 to 2015 (Fig. 1).

### **Offender Characteristics May Be Changing**

#### Demographics

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of 456 adult offenders who were primarily males (86.0%) and

ranged in age from 18 to 82 years, with a mean age of 38 years. Females accounted for 13.6 percent of all offenders, ranging in age from 18 to 61 years, with a mean age of 34. Three offenders were excluded from demographic statistics because gender for two offenders was not reported, and one offender was described as “transgender or transsexual.” Compared with prior studies of self-reporting zoophiles or animal sex offenders, the percentage of female offenders was higher<sup>1,7</sup> and males continued to offend later in life.<sup>1,10</sup> The number of women arrested doubled between 2012 and 2013 to a high of 17 offenders, dropping to only one female offender in 2014. Women offenders most often acted as part of a male/female couple ( $n = 40$ , 64.5%). Race was known for most offenders; white race was most prevalent (71.3%), followed by African-American (5.5%) and Hispanic-American (5.3%). Foreign-born and Native-American offenders were relatively rare (2.3%). Relationship status was known for 200 individuals. At the time of the index arrest, 87.5 percent of offenders were, or had been, in a personal relationship, and 64 offenders were reported to have more than one child. Employment status was known for 178 individuals (39.0%), most of whom were gainfully employed in a variety of fields. The most frequently reported jobs were those in public service, such as police, fire, or military service (14.8%), followed by animal-related jobs such as farming, animal shelter/rescue, pet services, and veterinary assistance (14.2%).

**Table 1** Offender Demographics

Offender age group at time of arrest ( <i>n</i> = 442), years	Male	Female
< 20	3 (0.8)	2 (3.3)
20–29	103 (27.2)	21 (35.0)
30–39	86 (22.8)	17 (28.3)
40–49	86 (22.8)	15 (25.0)
51–60	71 (18.8)	4 (6.7)
61–70	25 (6.6)	1 (1.7)
71–80	4 (1.1)	0 (0.0)
<b>Gender (<i>n</i> = 456)</b>		
Male		392 (86.0)
Female		62 (13.6)
Transgender		1 (0.2)
Unknown		1 (0.2)
<b>Race (<i>n</i> = 383)</b>		
White		325 (84.9)
African American		25 (6.5)
Hispanic		24 (6.3)
Other		9 (2.3)
<b>Relationship status (<i>n</i> = 200)</b>		
Single, no intimate relationships with humans		25 (12.5)
Is or has been in an intimate human relationship		175 (87.5)
<b>Children (<i>n</i> = 64)*</b>		
1		30 (15.1)
2		23 (11.6)
3		14 (7.0)
4		6 (3.0)
5		1 (0.5)
<b>Employment (<i>n</i> = 169)</b>		
Animal-related		24 (14.2)
Child-related		7 (4.1)
Student, unemployed		15 (8.9)
Military, fire, law enforcement		25 (14.8)
Teacher, minister		11 (6.5)
Medical, legal		15 (8.9)
Employed, not otherwise specified		72 (42.6)

Data are presented as *n* (%). Demographic information was variably available across the cases reviewed. The numbers for which specific information is available are listed for each demographic.

\* Number of offenders with children, including any children associated with this offender regardless of whether living with offender at time of incident.

### Criminal History

Half of all offenders (*n* = 241, 52.9%) had prior criminal histories. Among offenders with a criminal record, 33.2 percent of them had committed sexual offenses against children or adults, 25.7 percent had committed animal cruelty or bestiality, 26.6 percent had committed property-related offenses, 19.1 percent were involved with drugs or alcohol, 15.8 percent had convictions for interpersonal or domestic violence, and 10.8 percent had prior convictions for

child pornography. Two offenders had previously coerced another person to commit bestiality or solicited an animal for sexual purposes, and two had prior convictions for possession of weapons/explosives. Men who had previously been charged or convicted for animal sex abuse were nearly four times more likely to repeat this crime than offenders with no prior arrests for bestiality.

### Sexual Deviance

Thirty-four offenders (7.5%) were diagnosed with paraphilias or reported as exhibiting paraphilic interests or behaviors, one third of whom exhibited multiple paraphilias. The most prevalent paraphilia was coprophilia/urophilia (*n* = 7), followed by voyeurism (*n* = 5), zoophilia (*n* = 2), pedophilia (*n* = 2), necrophilia (*n* = 2), sadism/masochism (*n* = 2), cross-dressing (*n* = 1), and a fetish for stuffed animals (*n* = 1). There were no diagnoses of exhibitionism, although several offenders were arrested multiple times for acts committed in public places, including one undiagnosed offender who had sex with a dead dog in full view of a daycare facility.

### Animals and Humans Were Sexually Abused

Most of the 456 arrests involved the direct sexual abuse of an animal, a person, or both. Table 2 describes victim characteristics such as age, gender, and relationship to the offender. Table 3 compares the number of arrests in which an animal or a person was physically victimized. Animal and child victims depicted in pornography are discussed in another section.

### Animal Victims

Dogs were the most frequent victims, followed by horses, farm animals (e.g., cattle, goats, chickens, and pigs), and other species (e.g., reptiles, wildlife, cats, and birds). The number of animals sexually abused in each incident ranged from 1 to 24; however, most arrests involved a single animal (83.7%). The animal's age was reported in about half of all arrests (52.4%), and where known, they were most often under a year old. Animal victims most often lived with or were known to the offender (72.5% of incidents). In 71.1 percent of the arrests (*n* = 324), animals were directly sexually assaulted by the offender (*n* = 277), by a person the offender coerced (*n* = 30), or by someone the offender assisted (e.g., a willing spouse) (*n* = 17).

**Table 2** Victim Characteristics

	Animal	Child	Adult
Victims across 456 arrests, <i>n</i>	413	213	28
Arrests by victim type	340 (74.6)	138 (30.3)	24 (5.3)
Animal species			
Dog	238 (70.0)		
Horse, donkey	42 (12.4)		
Livestock (cow, pig, sheep, goat, chicken)	20 (5.9)		
Wildlife (deer, squirrel)	3 (0.9)		
Other (cat, reptile)	8 (2.4)		
Unknown	29 (8.5)		
Victim gender (% based on <i>n</i> victims in group)			
Male	48 (14.1)	32 (15.0)	3 (10.7)
Female	68 (20.0)	69 (32.4)	25 (89.3)
Both (arrests in which both genders were victimized)	5 (1.5)	14 (6.6)	0
Gender unknown	219 (64.4)	98 (46.0)	0
Age of youngest victim, years			
< 1	19 (5.6)	4 (1.9)	
1	7 (2.1)	6 (2.8)	
2	6 (1.8)	3 (1.4)	
3	5 (1.5)	7 (3.3)	
4	2 (0.1)	10 (4.7)	
5–10	12 (3.4)	27 (12.7)	
10–16	0	47 (22.1)	
Age not reported	289 (85.0)	109 (51.2)	28 (100.0)
Estimated number of victims involved in arrest			
1	250 (73.5)	97 (45.5)	21 (75.0)
2	30 (8.8)	24 (11.3)	3 (10.7)
3	9 (2.6)	4 (1.9)	0
4	2 (0.6)	2 (0.9)	0
5–10	3 (0.9)	8 (3.8)	0
Multiple	11 (3.2)	3 (1.4)	1 (3.6)
Unknown	35 (10.3)	75 (35.2)	3 (10.7)
Relationship to offender			
Lived with offender	166 (48.8)	55 (25.8)	0
Known to offender	80 (23.5)	46 (21.6)	24 (85.7)
Unknown to offender	47 (13.8)	14 (6.6)	3 (10.7)
Relationship not reported	47 (13.8)	98 (46.0)	1 (3.6)

Data are presented as *n* (%).

### Human Victims

At least 213 children and 28 adults were directly sexually victimized by the offender in 144 separate (31.6%) arrests. In 50 arrests, the offender had sex with a child or a non-consenting adult in addition to

having sex with an animal. In 30 arrests, the offender did not have sex with an animal, but coerced a child ( $n = 25$ ) or an adult ( $n = 5$ ) to do so through verbal or physical aggression; many of these incidents were filmed or photographed and then posted on the In-

**Table 3** Number of Arrests Involving Identified Animal or Human Victims

	Animal	Child	Adult
Direct sexual contact by offender	277 (60.7)	46 (10.1)	4 (0.9)
Coerced sexual contact by offender	30 (6.6)	13 (2.9)	12 (2.6)
Facilitated sexual contact by offender	17 (3.7)	0	0
Intended (solicited) sexual contact	16 (3.5)	5 (1.1)	3 (0.7)
Exploitive (pornographic images)	116 (25.4)	112 (24.6)	4 (9)
Contact level unknown	0	37 (8.1)	5 (1.1)

Data are presented as *n* (%).

ternet. In eight arrests, the offender did not have sex with an animal but solicited a child or adult to do so in the offender's presence. In 25 arrests (5.5%), animal pornography was used to groom a child for sexual behavior, and in two incidents an adult was sexually harassed or unknowingly filmed in a sex act with an animal. Among offenders with a criminal history, 80 (17.5%) had a prior history of child ( $n = 57$ ) or adult ( $n = 23$ ) sexual abuse, and 15 (3.3%) had prior convictions related to child pornography. In other words, 45.6 percent ( $n = 208$ ) of all offenders in the study had at some point sexually exploited or offended against children and adults.

### **Level of Sexual Contact Varied**

No single profile of an animal sex offender emerged; however, sex acts could be grouped into three broad categories: incidents in which the offender had, or intended to have, direct sexual contact with an animal (Direct or Intended); those in which the offender did not have sexual contact with an animal but facilitated, solicited, or coerced someone else to do so (Indirect); and incidents in which the offender did not have sex with an animal but viewed or collected animal pornography (Noncontact).

#### **Direct or Intended**

Direct or intended contact by the offender included incidents of fondling or sexual touching of an animal without penetration of genitals, anus, or mouth; penetration of an animal's mouth, anus, or sex organ by the offender or of the offender's mouth, anus, or sex organ by the animal; indeterminate contact (reported as "had sex with") in which contact occurred but the level of fondling or penetration was unknown; violent contact in which the animal was significantly injured or killed; deviant contact in which the offender had penetrative contact with an animal carcass; and intended contact in which the offender advertised or otherwise solicited an animal for sexual purposes.

Direct or intended contact was present in 64.3 percent of arrests, including 122 arrests reported as "had sex with." Penetration was reported in 116 arrests. Fondling and masturbation without penetration occurred in five arrests. In 72.5 percent of incidents, the animal lived with or was known to the offender. Thirty-four incidents involved violent or sadistic acts resulting in death or euthanasia of the animal, seven of which involved rape with an object. In four incidents, the offender had sex with an ani-

mal carcass. Slightly more than one quarter of the group (27.6%) were repeat offenders who had sex with more than one animal, multiple times with the same animal, or in multiple incidents over an extended period. In 50 arrests, the offender molested, raped, or otherwise sexually assaulted children and adults in addition to committing sex acts with an animal. At least eight of these offenders were registered sex offenders at the time of the index arrest. In a small percentage of arrests (3.5%), the offender solicited an animal for sexual purposes, typically through online advertising or social media. While solicitation occasionally resulted in some sort of trade (e.g., the offender offered a sexual service to the provider of the animal), the exchange of money was not reported in any arrest. One example of solicitation involved a 68-year-old male who advertised on Craigslist seeking sex with an animal, and then flew more than 2,000 miles with the intention of being sodomized, bringing along several shirts for the animal to urinate on, with the intention to masturbate to the memory later.

#### **Indirect Contact**

In 47 arrests (10.3%), the offender did not have sex with an animal but facilitated, filmed, solicited, or manipulated another person to do so. In 16 incidents, indirect sexual assault of an animal involved children: in nine incidents, a child was forced to have sex with the family pet; three incidents involved multiple children who were sexually abused as part of an underground "sex slave" operation; and in four incidents the offender used the Internet to intimidate minors into producing photos and videos of sex acts with animals. Eight incidents involved adults who were unable to consent due to mental health or substance impairment. Examples include an unconscious woman who was raped with a snake and a woman held hostage by a disturbed boyfriend who injected her with heroin and forced her to fellate his dog.

Sixteen indirect offenders filmed or otherwise assisted another adult in committing bestiality (e.g., arrests in which one partner filmed the other having sex with an animal) and then posted the images online. It is unknown whether the offender or actors received payment for any of the videos or still images.

A small subset of indirect offending involved incidents in which animals were crushed, tortured, and killed primarily for the sexual pleasure of the person

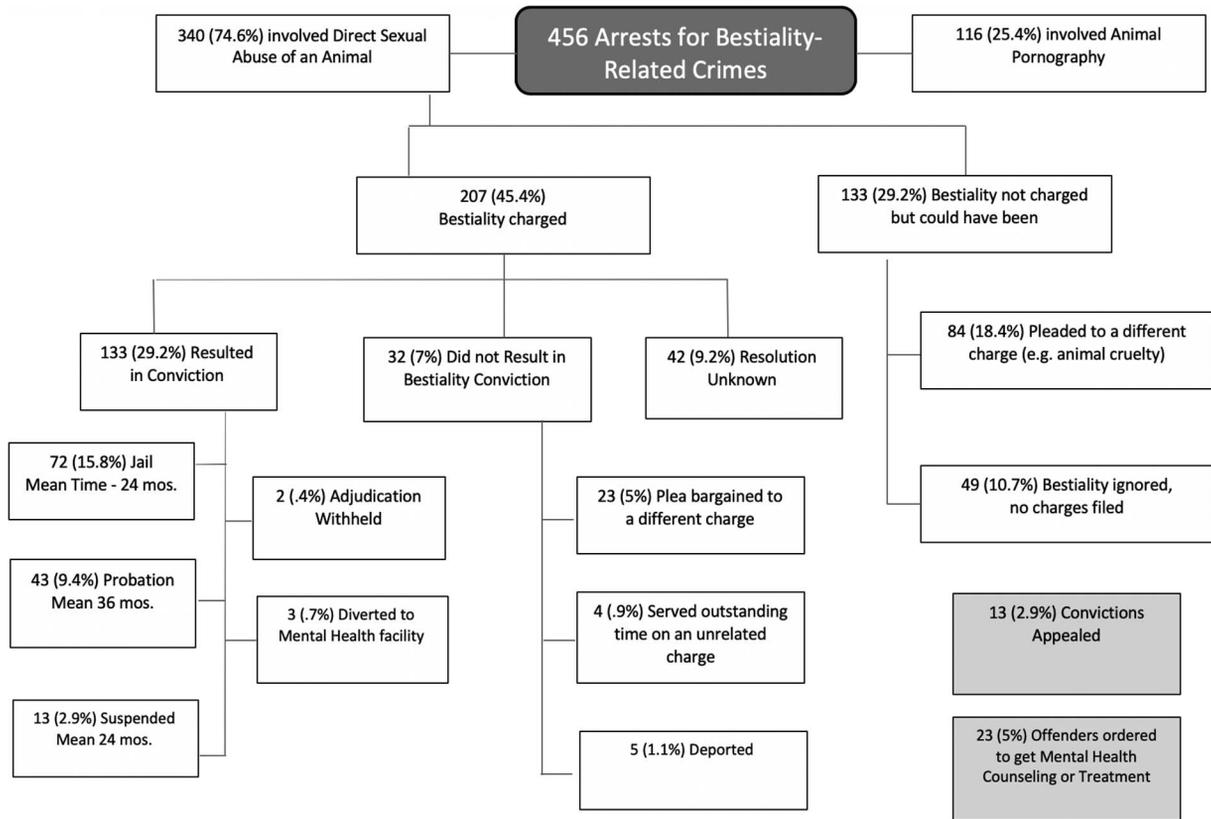


Figure 2. Summary of arrest resolutions through the courts.

watching. Three such incidents (involving a total of six offenders) were included in this study. The number of animals killed is unknown; however, in each incident, multiple small animals, including dogs, cats, rabbits, lizards, frogs, and other reptiles were depicted while being tortured and killed in videos or live webcasts. Two of the three incidents resulted in an exchange of money, including payment for the actors and directors as well as payment by the person watching the torture via webcam or video.

**Noncontact**

In 157 arrests (34.4% of all arrests), the offender had no sexual contact with an animal, but animal pornography (aniporn) was in evidence. Eleven offenders used aniporn to groom a child for sex acts, and in two incidents the images were shown to adults being stalked or harassed by the offender. Among offenders who collected aniporn, 26 (16.6% of the group) sexually abused children; three children and one adult were solicited for sex acts with an animal, and one child was forced to complete that act. Seven offenders (4.5%) collected pornographic anime or manga. All but two of the arrests in this group re-

sulted from child pornography or other sex-related investigations. Of the two arrests specifically for the collection of animal-related pornography, one offender sold crush videos to an out-of-state customer, and the other offender was a producer and distributor of bestiality and scat (human excrement) films.

**Wide Variability in Charging and Adjudication**

Fig. 2 summarizes adjudication outcomes for all 456 arrests. In the majority of arrests ( $n = 340$ , 74.6%), bestiality was a chargeable offense; however, prosecution was declined in 49 cases, and 84 offenders (24.7% of chargeable offenses) were allowed to plead to a charge that obscured the sexual nature of the crime (e.g., criminal trespass or animal cruelty). Among 207 cases where bestiality was charged (61.9% of the chargeable group), the outcome was pending or unknown for 42 cases. Of the cases that did not result in bestiality conviction, five offenders were deported, four served time on a different outstanding charge, and 23 plea-bargained to a non-sexual charge. Of the 207 cases, 64.3 percent ( $n = 133$ ) resulted in convictions with prison sentences averaging 24 months ( $n = 72$ ), probation averaging

36 months ( $n = 43$ ), or suspended sentences averaging 24 months ( $n = 13$ ). In five cases, adjudication was withheld ( $n = 2$ ) or diverted ( $n = 3$ ), meaning a prison or probated sentence would not be imposed as long as conditions of release or treatment were met ( $n = 2$ ). Twelve offenders were ordered to register as sex offenders; one of whom successfully appealed, arguing that, under the pertinent state law, “victim” was generally taken to mean a person not an animal. Of the 31 offenders who coerced a child to commit bestiality, only two were convicted on bestiality charges; both received 30-day sentences to run concurrently with other penalties. In other words, 29.2 percent of all bestiality-related arrests resulted in prosecution and sentencing for that crime.

### Discussion

The results of this research should be viewed with several factors in mind. During the 40-year period studied, significant changes occurred: the number of states criminalizing bestiality tripled between 1990 and 2015; Internet access and cell-phone technology facilitated greater access to animal pornography and interaction with others with zoophilic interests; and our knowledge and understanding of the relationship between animal and human cruelty increased, influencing how laws are written and enacted. A limitation of this study was the lack of prior statistics and available research on bestiality, which required construction of an original dataset. Although the resulting sample size was significant, it likely does not represent the entire population of people who have been arrested for bestiality-related acts. A further limitation was the lack of specificity in some source material, which has been described and explained where indicated above. A strength of the study is that the current findings provide a reliable platform from which to build hierarchical data and draw realistic conclusions about the nature and number of bestiality-related incidents and how they are resolved in the courts.

### Rise in Bestiality-Related Arrests

The dramatic increase in arrests since 2004 should be interpreted with caution. The lack of reported bestiality-related arrests in Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia, for example, is likely due to a lack of detection or reporting. It is also likely that many older arrests involving the sexual abuse of animals were not re-

ported as such, either because a law prohibiting bestiality did not exist at the time, or the offender was charged with something less descriptive, such as animal cruelty or public intoxication. In addition, the U.S. population has more than doubled over the past 40 years; therefore, there is a larger pool of potential offenders who may be detected now than in the past. Widespread Internet access may have resulted in more people acting on sexual fantasies and interests. For example, membership in online communities catering to a sexual interest in animals has grown significantly since the introduction of dial-up bulletin boards in the 1970s and 1980s. On one popular online site, which currently boasts more than a million users, subscribers regularly post “how-to” information for other people interested in bestiality, arrange to meet one another or to share animals, and otherwise encourage and validate behavior that is generally considered deviant.<sup>42</sup>

### Human Sexual Offending

A finding of concern was that nearly half (45.6%) of all offenders in the study sexually exploited or offended against children and adults either in the current incident or as part of their criminal background. This is an important finding, but it cannot be deduced from the study data that animal sexual abuse is a predictor or indicator of risk to sexually offend against children or adults, as has been reported in other studies.<sup>33,34</sup> In some incidents, child sex abusers admitted to having previously committed sex acts with animals without ever being caught. In other incidents, released sex offenders with no evidence of prior bestiality violated probation or parole by sexually abusing an animal.

### Criminal History and Demographics

The finding that 53 percent of animal sex abuse offenders had a prior criminal history involving sexual abuse, interpersonal violence, property-related offenses, and other crimes was consistent with previous studies.<sup>10,17,18</sup> In comparison to prior studies of self-reported sex acts with animals, the current findings indicate the number of female offenders may be increasing, and males may be offending later in life. It is unclear from the current data why more females appear to be sexually active with animals now than in the past; one possibility is that the number of women arrested overall has been increasing. According to The Sentencing Project, since 1980 the number of

incarcerated women has been increasing at a rate 50 percent higher than that for men.<sup>43</sup> A possible reason some male offenders continued to offend later in life is the increased availability and use of medications to treat erectile dysfunction. In private correspondence with older males who preferentially chose animals as sex partners, several mentioned that the use of drugs or devices to enhance sexual performance with animals is not uncommon (private communications with the author, June–July, 2017).

### **Variability in Adjudication**

As stated earlier, U.S. laws prohibiting bestiality are widely diverse, and this was reflected in how cases were charged, prosecuted, and sentenced. The variability relates in part to how the crime of animal sex abuse is perceived legally (i.e., as a form of animal cruelty, sexual assault, or a general criminal act), as well as ethically (i.e., as a crime against morals and public decency, a deviant act, or a crime against property). In general, penalties were strictest when laws prohibiting bestiality were part of the general criminal code, and least strict when such laws were part of the animal cruelty codes. That said, there were several instances where an act of bestiality was prosecuted as an act of aggravated animal cruelty, likely because the maximum penalty was greater than that allowed for an act of sexual abuse of an animal.

### **Risk of Reoffending**

Forensic evaluations, civil commitments, or mental health services were seldom utilized during adjudication. Across 456 offenders, only 23 (5.0%) received forensic evaluations. Among them, one individual had a known brain injury; another had previously been involuntarily committed to state mental health care; seven were violent offenders who injured or killed multiple animals; 13 were evaluated as part of the sex offender registry process (only one of whom was ordered to register as a sex offender); and two were diagnosed as zoophilic. Although it is not appropriate to use the legal system to diagnose medical conditions,<sup>44</sup> forensic evaluations could have shed light on underlying conditions that may have affected criminal behavior or had some bearing on sentencing and treatment ordered.<sup>45</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This is the first study to focus exclusively on arrests for bestiality-related offenses, and the findings un-

derscore that animal sexual abuse as a form of sexual assault as well as animal cruelty deserves serious attention. The indication that nearly half of the offenders studied also sexually offended against children and adults is alarming and calls for increased research as well as cross-reporting by law enforcement, social services, and medical and veterinary professionals when responding to suspected incidents of domestic and interpersonal violence, child endangerment, and animal cruelty. This reporting could be facilitated through standardization of intake and evaluation protocols that include questions related to potential animal sex abuse. The variability and inconsistency in how bestiality laws are written, enforced, and adjudicated indicate a need for greater education of enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and legislators. The broad range of sexual assault patterns indicate that zoophilia and bestiality are more pervasive and serious than previously thought, and additional research into the background and sexual motivation of animal sex offenders, as well as broader use of forensic evaluations, could aid in their detection, intervention, sentencing, and treatment protocols, as well as predicted risk of reoffending.

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