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How Many People Who Die By Suicide First Kill Their Pets?

COVID-19 will result in more suicides. What will the impact be on pets?

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Source: Photo by Christina Preiser/123RF

On the morning of December 26, 2019, in response to reports of gunshots, the Bellingham, Washington police were called to the condo of Kevin and Lynn Heimsoth. They found Lynn Heimsoth, who was the principal of the local elementary school, dead. After killing his wife, Mr. Heimsoth shot himself, but he did not die. The police also found the bodies of Sukha, the [therapy](#) dog Mrs. Heimsoth brought to school for the children, and the family's cat. Kevin Heimsoth was charged with murder and animal cruelty.

According to Florida State University psychologist [Thomas Joiner](#), between 11 and 17 murder-suicides occur each week in the United States. What made the Bellingham shooting unusual is that two of the victims were animals. News accounts of people killing their [pets](#) before taking their own lives are rare.

However, an analysis I conducted suggests these incidents may be considerably more common than we might expect. And they raise important

questions. For example, will the numbers increase due to [COVID-19](#)? And why do so many of these cases involve a murder as well as a suicide?

“Extended Suicide with Pets”

It is sometimes claimed that pets prevent suicides. But, as I recently pointed out ([Do Pet Owners Have Lower Suicide Rates?](#)), there is little evidence to support this idea. In a recent article in the journal [Anthrozoos](#), a team of Australian researchers headed by Dr. Janette Young found that many older people say their pets give them a reason to live. The investigators interviewed older adults about their relationships with their companion animals. To their surprise, a third of the pet-owners spontaneously said their pets helped keep them from committing suicide. However, the researchers also pointed to the dark side of the pet-suicide connection, instances in which people kill their pets before taking their own lives.

Only two small studies have investigated this phenomenon. The first was a [2013 article](#) in which Dr. Brian Cooke described seven reports in the American media in which people killed their dogs and then themselves. Cooke calls these incidents “extended suicides with a pet.” Several years later, the anthrozoologist James Oxley and his colleagues [reported](#) three additional cases in the UK.

Patterns of Extended Suicides Involving Pets

Combing through media reports is the only method that has been used to study suicides involving companion animals. Using Internet search engines, I located 30 articles in American newspapers published between 2010 and 2020 that reported incidents of extended suicide involving dogs or cats. When added to the seven incidents reported by Cooke, my database included 37 suicides with pets in the United States. With a sample this large, some patterns emerged.

The tragic statistics speak for themselves:

- *The Numbers.* In all, 81 people died in the 37 cases. These included 28 men, 33 women, and 20 children. In addition, 74 dogs and three cats were killed.
- *The Victims.* Unexpectedly, 80 percent of the cases were murder-suicides. In all these, the human-victim(s) were family members or long-

term partners. In 85 percent of the murder-suicides, the victim(s) included a spouse or girlfriend. In 11 cases, one or more children were also murdered. Two men were killed by their wives, one man was killed by his sister, and two mothers were killed by their adult children.

- *Pet Species.* In all 37 cases, a dog died. In three cases, the family cat was also killed. The most extreme incident involved an Ohio animal protectionist who ran an animal shelter. She killed herself and 32 small dogs by running her car in a closed garage. One dog survived.
- *The [Sex](#) and Age of Perpetrators.* Seventy percent of the homicide-suicide cases were attributed to male perpetrators and 15 percent to women. In the other 15 percent of cases, the individual who was the perpetrator was not identified in the news report. The average age of the perpetrators was 47. The youngest was a 32-year-old mother suffering from [post-partum depression](#). She killed her husband, their three-month-old child, and the family dog before turning the gun on herself. The oldest victims were a married couple. Both the husband and wife were 83 at the time of the shooting. They also killed their dog.
- *Methods.* Guns were used in all but one of the murder-suicides. The exception was a case described by Cooke (2013) in which a man killed himself, his 16-year-old daughter, and their dog in a minivan using carbon monoxide poisoning. However, guns were used in only two of the seven extended-suicide-with-a-pet cases that did not include homicide. Non-gun methods included leaping off a bridge, driving a car into a lake, overdosing on pills, jumping in front of a train, and carbon monoxide poisoning.
- *Motives.* The news reports gave little insight into why individuals chose to kill their pets and family members before they killed themselves. Two of the victims were reported as being [depressed](#). In only two cases, both involving elderly couples, did it seem that the deaths could have been the result of a suicide pact.
- *Failed Attempts.* In four cases, the suicides were botched. In three of these, the pet(s) died but not the person trying to commit suicide. The other case involved a carbon monoxide (car) suicide in which the

Extended Suicides with Pets Fit a Pattern: According to a [recent post](#) by Psychology Today blogger Joni Johnston, the perpetrators of murder-suicides are usually men and the victims usually women. There are multiple victims in

one of every four cases, and about 10 percent of these involve children under 16.

The cases I located involving pets fit this pattern exactly. In addition, perpetrators of murder-suicides tend to have a history of mental health problems, family violence, and adverse events in their lives. But, for the most part, the news reports I located gave little insight into the psychological states of the perpetrators.

People Really Do Think of Their Dogs As “Members of the Family.” Between 70 percent and 90 percent of Americans consider their pets family members. About 39 percent of the households in the US include dogs and 25 percent own a cat. But why were 95 percent of the animals in the cases dogs compared to only three cats? Further, in no case was a cat killed without the family dog also dying. The vastly skewed ratio of dogs to cats killed by their [suicidal](#) owners suggests that when it comes to extended suicides, dogs but not cats are family members.

The Tip of the Iceberg?

Each year, about 48,000 Americans died by suicide. Of these, only 0.5 percent are murder-suicides. This raises the question, why would 80 percent of suicides in which a pet was killed involve a homicide?

The reason for this huge disparity is selective media coverage. The vast majority of suicides in the US do not make the headlines, but murder-suicides do. Even the eight cases I located in which just the owner and a pet died had newsworthy components. For example, one involved a well-known country music star, and another was a death by train. And in the most recent case, the pet owner set his house on fire after shooting his dog.

In short, the statistics on extended-suicide-involving-a-pet are based on press reports. The implication is that these cases may reflect the tip of a large iceberg. If I am correct, it is likely that hundreds and perhaps thousands of pets are killed each year in suicides that do not make the headlines.

Finally, in a recent article in [JAMA Psychiatry](#), researchers predicted a major increase in suicides due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, they say that the current confluence of [social isolation](#), economic [stress](#), decreased access to community and religious support, and barriers to mental health services are “a

perfect storm” for suicide. The question is, how many pets will be collateral damage?

(Since the beginning of this year, there have been five press reports of suicides involving pets in the US. They resulted in the deaths of four men, five women, seven children, 10 dogs, and a cat.)

References

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