Bestiality Among Sexually Violent Predators

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Bestiality, or sexual contact between humans and nonhuman animals, is a poorly understood aspect of sexual behavior. There is a dearth of scientific research on the prevalence of bestiality, the motivations for individuals to engage in the behavior, and the risk that such individuals pose for interpersonal sexual and nonsexual violence. This study is a descriptive analysis of bestiality in all individuals found to be sexually violent predators (SVPs) in the state of Virginia between the years 2003 and 2017. Of 1,248 SVPs, 33 (2.6%) had a history of engaging in bestiality. SVPs with a history of bestiality were significantly more likely to be victims of childhood sexual abuse ($P < .005$), to engage in nonsexual animal abuse ($P < .0001$), and to have committed child sexual abuse ($P < .005$). They were most likely to report sexual contact with dogs and demonstrated a breadth of other atypical sexual behavior. The lifetime prevalence of 2.6 percent is low compared with other published findings, suggesting that offenders may have intentionally minimized their history of atypical sexual behavior. The relationship between childhood sexual victimization and bestiality has not previously been reported in the literature and represents an important nidus for future investigation. Further research is necessary to characterize human–animal sexual interactions in SVPs and other populations.

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Bestiality, or human sexual contact with nonhuman animals, is a poorly understood aspect of human sexuality. To date there has been limited scientific research of the behavior, and many fundamental questions remain unanswered. These include bestiality's prevalence and incidence, the motivations for individuals' sexual contact with animals, and the risk of interpersonal sexual and nonsexual violence posed by humans who have sex with animals. Research has been hampered by siloed study populations and a reliance on Internet samples.[1] This study describes the histories of bestiality in all individuals found to be sexually violent predators (SVPs) in the state of Virginia from 2003 through 2017.

One problem with research involving human–animal sexual contact is the difficulty in defining relevant terms. Bestiality is frequently conflated with zoophilia. The latter does not refer to human–animal sexual behavior, but rather a paraphilia in which one has an "intense and persistent sexual interest" in animals (Ref. 2, p 585). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, an individual may have a zoophilic disorder, diagnosed under the category of other specified paraphilic disorder, when the zoophilic interest "is currently causing distress or impairment to the individual" or when its "satisfaction has entailed personal harm, or risk of harm, to others." (Ref. 2, pp 685–686). Another term relevant to the study of bestiality is *zoophile* or *zoo*. Some individuals self-identify as zoophiles or zoos, oftentimes to indicate that they have a "relationship with the animal, an emotional attachment as well as sexual attraction" (Ref. 3, p 10). Not all individuals with zoophilia or zoophilic disorder may identify as zoophiles, and not all zoophiles may meet criteria for a diagnosis of zoophilia or zoophilic disorder.[1] The preferred forensic veterinary term for bestiality is "animal sexual abuse," to recognize the harm caused to animals from sexual contact with humans.[4]

The basic epidemiological question of the prevalence of bestiality remains unanswered. Most of the

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research on bestiality's prevalence is outdated and of questionable generalizability to today's society in the United States and other nations. In 1948, Alfred Kinsey and colleagues[5] published their findings that approximately 8 percent of United States males had engaged in any sexual contact with an animal and that 40 to 50 percent of farm-raised boys had engaged in any sexual contact with an animal. In 1953, Kinsey and colleagues[6] followed up with a study of female sexuality and reported that 1.5 percent of preadolescent females and 3.6 percent of adult females described having at least one sexual encounter with an animal. In a survey of 982 men in 24 United States cities, Hunt[7] found that 4.9 percent reported at least one episode of sexual contact with an animal. No national prevalence studies have been conducted since Hunt's survey in the 1970s.

Other studies of bestiality's prevalence have been siloed to various populations. In her work with self-identified zoophiles, Miletski[3] identified a point prevalence of bestiality (i.e., current engagement in sex with animals) of 83 percent in her 82 male subjects and 82 percent in her 11 female subjects. In their work in maximum- and medium-security prisons in the southern United States, Hensley, Henderson, and colleagues[8,9] identified a prevalence of histories of bestiality ranging from 6 to 20 percent. In a study of sexual offenders forensically committed to a state hospital, Holoyda[10] identified a prevalence rate of 3.6 percent, or three out of 84 subjects. Only two of the three subjects with a history of bestiality were diagnosed with other specified paraphilic disorder (zoophilia).[10] One final study examining bestiality's prevalence was conducted in an inpatient psychiatric unit. Alvarez and Freinhar[11] surveyed 20 psychiatric inpatients, 20 general medical inpatients, and 20 members of the psychiatric staff about prior sexual relations with and sexual fantasy about animals; nine of the psychiatric inpatients and none of the other two groups reported prior sexual contact with animals. The authors did not address the presence of possible confounding variables, such as delusional or disorganized thinking, that may have accounted for patients' responses.[11]

No studies to date have examined the phenomenon of bestiality in SVPs. Statutory definitions of "sexually violent predator" require that the committed individual has a "mental abnormality" that increases the individual's risk of sexually violent offending. First and Halon noted that "certain of the paraphilias come closest to the sexual psychopathology defined in the SVP laws" (Ref. 12, p 444). One might therefore expect SVPs to more frequently have a history of bestiality than populations previously studied. In this study, we sought to identify the prevalence of bestiality in all individuals found to be SVPs in the state of Virginia from 2003 to 2017. We also sought to characterize subjects based on their demographics, personal histories, and other atypical sexual behavior.

Methods

Data Source

Data used in this study were collected as part of an ongoing project of the state of Virginia's Office of the Attorney General in Richmond, Virginia. Legal interns from the Office of the Attorney General were responsible for reviewing the reports of SVP evaluators and maintaining a database of SVPs and their demographic information, commitment offenses, criminal histories, and other historical variables as described below. They also documented history of sexual contact with animals noted in the SVP evaluation reports. All SVP evaluation reports involved in formulating the database are publicly available in Virginia court records. After the database was completed, a de-identified version was provided to the researchers. The St. Louis University Institutional Review Board determined that the research did not constitute human subject research based on the variables included in the final dataset.

Subjects

The study sample includes all individuals found to be SVPs in the state of Virginia between the years 2003 and 2017. Virginia's SVP law, the Civil Commitment of Sexually Violent Predators Act, was passed on April 2, 2003.[13] The law defines a sexually violent predator as "any person who (i) has been convicted of a sexually violent offense, or has been charged with a sexually violent offense and is unrestorably incompetent to stand trial . . . and (ii) because of a mental abnormality or personality disorder, finds it difficult to control his predatory behavior, which makes him likely to engage in sexually violent acts."[14] Similar to other SVP laws, the statute identifies mental abnormality or personality

disorder as "a congenital or acquired condition that affects a person's emotional or volitional capacity and renders the person so likely to commit sexually violent offenses that he constitutes a menace to the health and safety of others."[14] In Virginia, offenders are screened by the Department of Corrections and subsequently referred for a psychological evaluation and a review by the Commitment Review Committee, which is composed of members from the Department of Corrections and the Office of the Attorney General. The Commitment Review Committee refers the case to the Office of the Attorney General with recommendations, and the Office of the Attorney General chooses whether to file a petition for civil commitment with one of the circuit courts of Virginia. If found at trial to be an SVP, the individual may be civilly committed to the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services or conditionally released to the community.[15]

Variables

Staff at the Office of the Attorney General collected data on demographic variables, including the SVPs' gender, ethnicity, marital status, and history of childhood sexual victimization. Forensic variables included the SVP commitment offense (i.e., the most recent criminal offense), a brief description of the commitment offense, and the presence or absence of prior acts of bestiality or nonsexual animal abuse. For subjects with a history of bestiality, the types of animals and a brief description of the sexual acts were recorded.

Analysis

For the purpose of comparing the demographic and historical variables of SVPs with a history of bestiality and those without a history of bestiality, chi-square tests or Fisher exact tests were applied. We tested for statistical significance at $P < .05$.

Hypotheses

Because paraphilic disorders best conform to the statutory requirement of a mental abnormality in SVP proceedings,[12] we hypothesized that this sample would have a higher lifetime prevalence rate of bestiality compared with rates previously obtained from the general population and other correctional samples. In addition, because prior studies demonstrated a relationship between bestiality and other forms of animal abuse in correctional samples,[8,9] we hypothesized that SVPs with a history of bestiality would be more likely than those without a history of bestiality to have engaged in nonsexual abuse of animals.

Results

In the state of Virginia, there were 1,248 individuals found to be SVPs between the years 2003 and 2017. There were only six females in the sample the rest were male. Over half of the sample were African American, and slightly more than one third were Caucasian. The majority were single and never married. Most subjects reported no history of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). In terms of their contact with animals, the vast majority reported no history of nonsexual animal abuse, whereas 33 (2.6%) reported a history of engaging in sexual contact with animals.

Table 1 presents the differences in gender, ethnicity, marital status, CSA history, nonsexual animal abuse, and commitment offense between SVPs with a history of bestiality and those without. One female had a history of bestiality. There were statistically significant differences between SVPs with a history of bestiality and those without. Those with a history of bestiality were more likely to be Caucasian, victims of CSA, and have a history of nonsexual animal abuse. Similar proportions from each group had commitment offenses of rape, battery, carnal knowledge of a child, and other sexually motivated offenses. No subject had a history of arrest for bestiality or a bestiality-related offense. Less common commitment offenses included parole or probation violations, child pornography possession, indecent exposure, and abduction with intent to defile.

Table 2 summarizes the histories of atypical sexual behavior of SVPs with and without a history of bestiality. SVPs with a history of bestiality more commonly reported a history of committing CSA (63.6%) than those without a history of bestiality (38.5%). The same was true for necrophilic acts, although evaluees rarely reported such acts. The two groups did not differ significantly in the proportion of subjects reporting histories of genital exposure, voyeurism, or possessing child sexual abuse materials.

In those subjects who reported prior sexual contact with animals, dogs were the most common victims. About 75 percent of subjects reported a history of sex with dogs. Much less commonly endorsed animals were cats (15.2%), pigs (9.1%), deer (6.0%), and others. Other animals reported by one subject

Table 1 Characteristics of SVPs With and Without History of Bestiality, 2003–2017

Variable	SVPs with No History of Bestiality	SVPs with History of Bestiality	Statistical Analysis
Gender			$P = .1488$[a,b]
Male	1210 (99.6)	32 (97.0)	
Female	5 (0.4)	1 (3.0)	
Race			$X^2 = 23.7362$;
Caucasian	450 (37.0)	26 (78.8)	$P < .0001$
Non-Caucasian	765 (63.0)	7 (21.2)	
Marital status			$X^2 = 2.4703$[b]
Single, never married, or other	784 (64.5)	23 (69.7)	
Divorced	238 (19.6)	8 (24.2)	
Married/separated	193 (15.9)	2 (6.1)	
Victim of childhood sexual abuse			$X^2 = 8.3907$;
Yes	232 (19.1)	13 (39.4)	$P = .0038$
No	983 (80.9)	20 (60.6)	
History of nonsexual animal abuse			$X^2 = 23.9918$;
Yes	46 (3.8)	7 (21.2)	$P < .0001$
No	1169 (92.6)	26 (78.8)	
Commitment offense			$X^2 = 3.6503$[b]
Rape	452 (37.2)	10 (30.3)	
Sexual battery	399 (32.8)	9 (27.3)	
Carnal knowledge	123 (10.1)	3 (9.1)	
Other	241 (19.8)	11 (33.3)	

Data presented as *n* (%). SVPs with no history of bestiality: $n = 1,215$; SVPs with history of bestiality: $n = 33$.
[a] *P* value derived with Fisher exact test.
[b] Not significant.
SVP = sexually violent predator

each included an elephant, a cow, beetles, and a horse.

Discussion

Prevalence

In this study of all individuals found to be SVPs in the state of Virginia between 2003 and 2017, we identified a relatively low lifetime prevalence rate of bestiality. Only 2.6 percent of offenders had a history of bestiality documented in their SVP evaluation reports. This rate is similar to the 3.6 percent of subjects with a history of bestiality among forensically hospitalized sexual offenders.[10] The rate is strikingly lower than the 8 percent of United States adult men in the 1940s as reported by Kinsey and colleagues,[5] the 4.9 percent of United States adult men in the 1970s as reported by Hunt,[7] and rates obtained among other incarcerated populations.[8,9] The low lifetime prevalence of bestiality in this sample is noteworthy in part because SVPs generally carry paraphilic disorder diagnoses as the mental abnormality upon which their civil commitment is based. As Abel *et al.*[16] described, individuals with a history of bestiality are likely to experience a greater degree of paraphilic cross-over to other paraphilic interests than other individuals with atypical sexual interests. It is therefore particularly surprising that, in a sample of individuals expected to have a greater burden of paraphilic disorder diagnoses, the identified lifetime prevalence rate of bestiality was less than that of the general population of U.S. men in the 1940s and 1970s.

One possible explanation for the relatively low rate identified in this sample is that forensic evaluations

Table 2 Other Problematic Sexual Behaviors of SVPs

Variable	SVPs with No History of Bestiality	SVPs with History of Bestiality	Statistical Analysis
Child sexual abuse	468 (38.5)	21 (63.6)	$X^2 = 8.5059$; $P = .0035$
Genital exposure	114 (9.1)	4 (12.1)	$P = .5449$[a,b]
Necrophilic acts	0 (0)	2 (6.1)	$P = .0007$[a]
Voyeuristic acts	31 (2.6)	1 (3.0)	$P = .5804$[a,b]
Possession of child sexual abuse material	5 (0.4)	1 (3.0)	$P = .1488$[a,b]

Data presented as *n* (%). SVPs with no history of bestiality: $n = 1,215$; SVPs with history of bestiality: $n = 33$.
[a] *P* values derived with Fisher exact test.
[b] Not significant.
SVP = sexually violent predator

in SVP proceedings are compulsory and can lead to civil commitment. Subjects therefore have an incentive to minimize their histories of atypical sexual behavior because revealing a history of bestiality or other atypical sexual behavior may make them more likely to be declared SVPs. This situation differs from that of the studies by Hensley and colleagues,[8,9] which involved a voluntary research context. Indeed, subjects in this study had no incentive to accurately disclose a history of bestiality.

Historical Variables

A significantly greater proportion of SVPs with a history of bestiality reported a history of nonsexual animal abuse. Most research on animal cruelty and bestiality in offenders has focused on their relationship to future interpersonal violence, with some data suggesting that bestiality and other childhood animal cruelty methods like drowning and stabbing animals are a risk factor for adult interpersonal offending.[8,17,18] Our results, however, suggest that bestiality may represent a risk factor for other forms of animal cruelty, at least in this population. This finding supports the idea that bestiality, in some individuals, may be motivated primarily by an intention to engage in cruelty toward animals, as opposed to having a loving relationship with an animal, as many self-identified zoophiles report.[19]

SVPs with a history of bestiality were also significantly more likely to report a history of childhood sexual victimization than those without a history of bestiality. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has identified a link between CSA and bestiality. Although we were not able to establish a time course of individual subjects' behavior to determine if CSA precedes bestiality, our findings do suggest that CSA may be a risk factor for later bestiality. Victims of CSA often experience depression, stress, difficulties establishing relationships, and problems with normal sexual functioning.[20–22] For individuals with significant trauma experience, animals may seem like a safer, less aggressive, and less emotionally distressing outlet for sexual behavior.

Problematic Sexual Behavior

Most SVPs with a history of bestiality reported that they had engaged in sexual activity with one or more dogs. This finding is consistent with Miletski's study of self-identified zoophiles, the majority of whom reported first engaging in bestiality with a dog.[23] It is also consistent with a recent study by Edwards[24] involving individuals arrested for acts of bestiality. She found that, of 413 animal victims in the arrests, 238 (70.0%) were dogs. Unlike the subjects in these recent studies, however, only one SVP reported engaging in sexual activity with a horse, as opposed to a sizable proportion of Miletski's male subjects (17%) and Edwards' animal victims (12.4%, $n = 42$).[23,24] It is unclear what might account for this difference, although type of living environment (urban versus rural) may play a role in animal availability and animal selection.

SVPs in both groups had a history of other problematic sexual behavior, most commonly perpetrating CSA. This finding was more common in SVPs with a history of bestiality, which supports the contention by Abel[25] that a history of bestiality may be a strong predictor of sexual abuse of children. It is also consistent with the recent study by Edwards,[24] which demonstrated a high rate of human child victimization in the context of bestiality arrests. In Edwards' study, there were 213 children who were "directly sexually victimized by the offender in 144 separate arrests" (Ref. 24, p 341) out of the total of 456 bestiality arrests. Most of the child victims were involved in the production of pornographic images ($n = 112$, 52.6%), and a significant number were sexually assaulted ($n = 59$, 27.7%).[24]

Subjects in this study reported additional atypical sexual behavior, though far less frequently than they reported CSA. Two SVP subjects with a history of bestiality endorsed a history of necrophilic acts. Genital exposure, voyeurism, and the possession of child sexual abuse materials were rare. Unfortunately, subjects' psychiatric diagnoses were unavailable, so it is unclear if these individuals had paraphilic disorders consistent with their behaviors, or if they engaged in atypical sexual behavior for other reasons. Regardless, the breadth of sexual activities is consistent with prior findings that individuals with a history of bestiality may cross over into other areas of atypical sexual behavior.[16]

Implications

Based on this research, bestiality appears to be a relatively uncommon finding in the history of SVPs. The legal context and potential outcomes of SVP proceedings create an incentive for evaluees to minimize their problematic or atypical sexual interests, which may account for our comparatively low life-

time prevalence rate of bestiality. In those subjects who do report a history of bestiality, it may be especially relevant to evaluate for a history of other forms of animal cruelty, childhood sexual victimization, and the perpetration of CSA and other atypical sexual behavior, though the latter are likely to be a focus of any SVP assessment.

Limitations

This study has various limitations worth noting. First, the method of data collection involved review of SVP evaluators' reports. In some cases it may be possible that the evaluator did not ask about the offender's history of bestiality, thus falsely reducing the number of subjects with a history of bestiality. A reliance on court reports also prevented the researchers from confirming various historical details and obtaining clarification of prior behavior.

Another major limitation was the absence of diagnoses from the data set. Diagnoses would have enabled us to clarify if individuals' atypical sexual behaviors were associated with the relevant paraphilic disorders. Furthermore, diagnoses would have enabled us to assess the prevalence of comorbid psychiatric disorders, including personality disorders, mood disorders, and others.

One final limitation is the population studied. The goal of the study was to examine the prevalence of bestiality among one state's SVPs, but it is worth noting that this focus limits the generalizability of our findings to the entire population of the United States. Future research utilizing a representative sample from the United States may help to clarify the current prevalence of bestiality and comorbid atypical sexual behavior in this country. Regardless, this research represents the first study of bestiality among SVPs and yielded some unexpected findings.

Conclusion

This study is one of the few efforts to assess the prevalence of bestiality in any population, although the identified rate among SVPs in the state of Virginia was surprisingly lower than published rates in the general population and other incarcerated populations. Our findings confirm prior observations that individuals with a history of bestiality typically engage in sex with dogs, that some individuals may engage in sex with animals as a form of cruelty, and that individuals with a history of bestiality may cross over into other atypical sexual behavior. The results also suggest that bestiality may be related to a history of childhood sexual victimization, with the resultant psychological and interpersonal sequelae possibly contributing to individuals' use of animals as a sexual outlet. Future research in this area may help to elucidate the prevalence of zoophilic diagnoses among SVPs, the relationship between zoophilic diagnoses and bestiality in SVPs, and the connection between childhood sexual victimization and bestiality in SVPs and other populations.

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