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Tracking Animal Abuse (and Abusers) on the Web

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The growth of on-line public registries and tracking sites of animal abusers could reduce the number of crime victims—both human and animal—say activists. But researchers who examine sex-offender and other similar criminal registries aren't so sure.

Shon Rahrig once left a cat with a broken jaw and several broken bones. But thanks to a website called [Pet-Abuse.com](#), he will find it hard to get away with abusing an animal elsewhere in the U.S. ever again.



The 41-year-old was charged with animal cruelty while living in Columbus, Ohio in 1999, after his girlfriend took the cat—one of several pets he had adopted from local shelters and subsequently was alleged to have tortured—to a vet (who later euthanized the animal). Court records show that Rahrig later pled guilty to one charge of animal cruelty and served 45 days in jail. He also was prohibited from owning an animal for five years, according to [Pet-Abuse.com](#).

That didn't appear to faze Rahrig, who allegedly showed up at an animal adoption event in Long Beach, California soon after he moved there from Ohio. But [Pet-Abuse.com](#) was on the case. Using tips from the public and law enforcement, the site tracked and publicized Rahrig's travels, including subsequent moves to Florida and then back to California.

The site's vigilance, in coordination with law enforcement and activists on the ground, may have kept him from adopting again.

The nearly 17,000 abuse cases tracked on [Pet-Abuse.com](#) represent a fraction of the total. That's why the site operators and other organizations are in favor of a network of publicly accessible registries across the country that would provide complete lists of anyone convicted of felony animal abuse. Patterned after the state sex offender registries begun in the 1990s, these would warn pet stores, shelters and neighbors of those in their midst who might pose a danger to both pets and humans because of their violent tendencies.

"This isn't simply about protecting animals from abuse," says Martin Mersereau of [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) (PETA). "This is about protecting our sons and daughters."

The campaign recorded its first victory last year. In November, New York's Suffolk County became the first jurisdiction to enact an animal abuser registry. When it launches in May 2011, it will put the names, addresses and photos of those convicted of felony animal abuse in the county onto a public website—where they'll stay for five years.

Last year also saw animal registry legislation introduced in four states, a list including California, New Jersey, New York, and Louisiana. And two members of the Texas House of Representatives (a Democrat and a Republican) are introducing legislation in the current session that would create an animal abuser registry in that state.

Spearheading the national effort is the 30-year-old [Animal Legal Defense Fund](#) (ALDF), a California-based group that uses the courts to fight for stronger enforcement of anti-cruelty laws and more humane treatment. The organization has an online petition drive underway calling on state legislators to pass laws like that in Suffolk County. It also has developed a "model law" on which it hopes states will pattern their own legislation.

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Links with Child Abuse and Other Crimes

To persuade lawmakers, advocates are emphasizing the well-established links between animal abuse and other violent behaviors like child abuse and domestic violence. A 1983 survey of pet-owning families where there was child physical abuse, for example, found that the animals were mistreated in 88 percent of those homes.

And a study in 1998 of women seeking protection at domestic violence safe houses showed that 71 percent of those who had pets said that their partner had threatened, hurt or killed the animals. That same study reported that about a third of the mothers said their children had hurt or killed their pets.

Advocates also point to the many cases of high-profile murderers found to have tortured and killed animals as children and youth. They include Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Albert DeSalvo (the Boston Strangler), and teens implicated in at least seven school shootings. So credible is the link that that the FBI and the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice use animal cruelty as one of the early warning signs when assessing a young person's potential for violence.

The ALDF's Stephan Otto argues that by alerting communities to the presence of abusers, states and counties can reduce the number of new victims, both human and animal. Beyond addressing the moral issue, he predicts that preventing new animal cruelty crimes will produce other benefits, like reducing court costs for cash-strapped states and counties. States' up-front investment to set up a registry would be small, he says: between \$18,000 and \$60,000.

Do public registries work? The head of the country's largest animal rights group is skeptical.

Wayne Pacelle, head of [The Humane Society of the United States](#), notes that the majority of animal abuse is perpetrated by people who neglect their own animals and are unlikely to pose a danger to neighbors' pets. Thus, he argues, a system that alerts communities will do nothing to stop these incidents.


While Pacelle is not "categorically" against such registries, he thinks the effort is a distraction from the core law enforcement work that needs to be done, such as strengthening and better enforcing current anti-cruelty statutes.

Otto agrees that the majority of animal abuse involves neglect by a caretaker. But for the ALDF, stopping the smaller percentage of cases that do involve a third party—someone in the neighborhood, for instance, who kidnaps pets, or an abuser who adopts from a pet store that knows nothing about their past—is sufficient grounds for a registry.

Megan's Law

Stopping such "stranger abuse" by convicted sex offenders was the idea behind the federal 1996 [Megan's Law](#), on which the animal abuser registry effort is patterned. That law, and earlier versions passed in several states, created online state registries designed to thwart offenders who might be living in neighborhoods without the knowledge of parents.

But 15 years on, it's unclear that Megan's Law has achieved its aims. Proponents of registries argued that neighbors would take precautions if alerted to a sex offender living close by. But two studies—one of a sample of Nebraska residents in 2008 and [the other](#) of Michigan residents in 2009—found that most of those surveyed had not looked at their state's sex offender registry. In the Nebraska survey, of those who did use the registry, few took preventive measures.

Megan's Law supporters also argued that registries would reduce the number of offenders who commit new crimes since they know they're being watched. But it's not clear that's happened. In 2009, researchers at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy [looked at](#)  seven studies on recidivism by registered sex offenders, conducted between 1995 and 2009. Two showed that being on a registry decreased recidivism, one showed an increase, three indicated no effect, and one didn't measure the effect.

Those murky outcomes don't seem to have deterred states from creating a range of new public registries, most begun since 2005.

There are websites listing methamphetamine offenders in [Minnesota](#), [Tennessee](#), and [Illinois](#). In Montana, those convicted of certain offenses (operating a drug laboratory, kidnapping, assault, and arson, for example) are included in a combined [Sexual or Violent Offender Registry](#). [New Mexico](#) and [Ohio](#) have drunk-driver registries. And at least eight states have created catch-all databases of offenders, both those who have served their time and those still in prison.

Criminologist Noah Fritz is skeptical of the usefulness of public registries. He founded a U.S. Department of Justice-funded crime mapping and analysis program and teaches at the Metropolitan State College of Denver. He thinks registries may have value when police are analyzing crime for patterns, especially outside their own jurisdictions. But he wonders about the purpose of making registries public and thinks it's time to test the assumptions that led to their creation.

Measuring Success

Indeed, there appears to be little if any research on whether the newer registries reduce crime. As for the new animal abuser registry, the ALDF's Otto says one way they'll measure success in Suffolk County is according to whether there's a drop in the number of animals impounded from their owners.

But even successes like that may not be the only consideration.

Tod Burke, a former Maryland police officer and Radford University criminal justice professor, says registries raise the question of whether people convicted of a crime forever give up their right to privacy. He imagines a scenario in which storeowners convince law enforcement that the way to reduce shoplifting is to create a database of people convicted of the crime. Storeowners then could use already-available facial recognition technology to stop at the door those on the list.

"It would make law enforcement easier, but at what expense?" he asks.

Ex-offenders view such privacy infringements as a significant barrier to stabilizing their lives. At least three studies conducted between 2000 and 2007 indicate that being listed on a sex offender registry leads to a loss of positive community supports and to barriers in getting housing and employment, both linked to increased recidivism.

Alex Friedmann, a former prisoner and now assistant editor of the twenty-year-old *Prison Legal News*, calls registries the "scarlet letter of our time" and wonders where it will all end.

"If you're going to put animal abusers on a registry why not everybody?" asks Friedmann. "Every offense is important to somebody.... Should we have a litterbug registry? It's a serious question...."

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