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REPORTES DE MALTRATO ANIMAL EN MEDELLÍN: UN ENFOQUE PARA IMPLEMENTAR SISTEMAS DE ALERTA TEMPRANA PARA LA PREVENCIÓN DE OTRAS FORMAS DE VIOLENCIA

**ANIMAL ABUSE REPORTS IN MEDELLÍN: AN APPROACH
TO IMPLEMENTING EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS FOR THE
PREVENTION OF OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE**

Juan Felipe Zapata Martínez ,

Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Erick Johan Córdoba Torres

Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Sebastian Santa Oquendo, Martínez

Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Hesed Fernando Díaz Noscue

Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Julio Cesar Aguirre

Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Juan José Ruiz Roldán

Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Andrés Felipe Tirado

Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Faculty of Nursing

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Reportes de maltrato animal en Medellín: un enfoque para implementar sistemas de alerta temprana para la prevención de otras formas de violencia

Juan Felipe Zapata Martínez¹juan.zapata@uniremington.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8782-945X>Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of
Veterinary Medicine

Corporación para las Investigaciones Biologicas

Universidad de Antioquia, Faculty of Medicine

Medellín, Colombia

Erick Johan Córdoba Torreserick.cordoba.6321@miremington.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3202-4626>Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of
Medicine.

País Medellín, Colombia

Sebastian Santa Oquendo, Martínezsebastian.santana.2003@miremington.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3163-1739>Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of
Medicine.

Medellín, Colombia

Hesed Fernando Díaz Noscuehesed.diaz.8014@miremington.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0093-1895>Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of
Medicine.

Medellín, Colombia

Julio Cesar Aguirrejulio.aguirre@uniremington.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0998-3328>Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of
Veterinary Medicine

Medellín, Colombia

Juan José Ruiz Roldánjuan.ruiz@uniremington.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9701-3542>Corporación Universitaria Remington, Faculty of
Veterinary Medicine**Andrés Felipe Tirado**felipe.tirado@upb.edu.co<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9010-1494>Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Faculty of
Nursing

Medellín, Colombia

¹ Autor principal.Correspondencia: juan.zapata@uniremington.edu.co

RESUMEN

Tras la promulgación de la Ley 1774 en 2016, Colombia reconoció formalmente a los animales como seres sintientes, estableciendo un marco legal para salvaguardar su bienestar. A pesar de este avance, persisten brechas en la implementación y en el reporte de casos de maltrato animal. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo describir los eventos relacionados con los reportes de maltrato animal en Medellín, ofreciendo una visión cuantitativa que permita comprender mejor este fenómeno. Se realizó un estudio transversal utilizando informes de inspección policial. En total, se analizaron 320 reportes, excluyendo aquellos con inconsistencias. El procesamiento de los datos se llevó a cabo en RStudio y SPSS, con el fin de explorar correlaciones entre los reportes de maltrato animal y los datos de homicidios en la ciudad. Los principales hallazgos muestran que el 29,9% de los casos carecía de evidencia de maltrato, y el 48,9% no recibió intervención debido a factores externos. Solo el 7,5% de los casos resultó en la reubicación del animal. Se identificó una fuerte correlación (0,823) entre los reportes de maltrato animal y los reportes de homicidio, lo que sugiere una relación significativa entre estas formas de violencia. Este estudio ofrece una base para desarrollar estrategias preventivas y mejorar la gestión del maltrato animal en Medellín, contribuyendo a la evaluación y el fortalecimiento de las políticas de protección animal.

Palabras clave: Violencia; Crueldad Animal, Animale; crimen



Animal Abuse Reports in Medellín: An Approach to Implementing Early Warning Systems for the Prevention of Other Forms of Violence

ABSTRACT

Following the enactment of Law 1774 in 2016, Colombia recognized animals as sentient beings, aiming to safeguard their welfare. Despite this legal framework, challenges persist in the implementation and reporting of animal abuse. This study aimed to describe the events related to animal abuse reports in Medellín, providing a quantitative approach to better understand this issue. A cross-sectional study was conducted using police inspection reports. A total of 320 reports were analyzed, excluding those with inconsistencies. Data processing utilized statistical tools such as RStudio and SPSS to correlate animal abuse reports with homicide data in the city. Key findings revealed that 29.9% of cases lacked evidence of abuse and 48.9% had no intervention due to external reasons. Only 7.5% of the cases led to animal relocation. Additionally, a significant correlation (0.823) was found between animal abuse reports and homicide reports, suggesting a relationship between these forms of violence. This study provides a foundation for developing preventive strategies and managing animal abuse in Medellín, thereby contributing to the evaluation of animal protection policies.

Keywords: Violence; animal cruelty; animals, crime

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INTRODUCCIÓN

In Colombia, animals were recognized as sentient beings following the approval of Bill 172 of 2015 (Bill 172, 2015), introduced on September 3, 2014, which led to the enactment of Law 1774 of 2016 (Law 1774, 2016). This legislation amended the Civil Code, Law 84 of 1989, the Penal Code, and the Code of Criminal Procedure and introduced other provisions, including the country's regulatory framework concerning crimes against the life, physical integrity, and emotional well-being of animals. Consequently, Colombia has joined over 30 countries that acknowledge animal sentience (World Animal Protection, 2024). Although numerous studies have analyzed the legal recognition of animal sentience in Colombia (Aguirre et al., 2018; Contreras-Rojas, 2016; Duran & Vega, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2019; Pacheco Niño, 2018), few have described the phenomenon. There is a need for quantitative analyses that facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon of animal abuse reports, characterization of abuse through complaints, identification of profiles of complainants and accused individuals, definition of primary victims and types of mistreatment, and development of preventive strategies and management approaches for animal abuse and violence. This will allow for an evaluation of the impact of animal protection policies and a better understanding of this phenomenon in relation to other forms of violence.

Therefore, this study aimed to describe the events associated with animal abuse reports in the city of Medellín and its surrounding areas, providing an initial approach to a differentiated understanding of the phenomenon in the city.

METHODS

Study Design: A cross-sectional study was conducted using data from police inspection records that handle reports of animal abuse and violence in Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia.

No sample size was calculated, as the study utilized the total available data provided by the inspection, which amounted to 320 reports after excluding those with inconsistencies, such as missing information on the animal species, complainants' sociodemographic details, and duplicate information.

To relate the reports to other social variables related to violence, the study referenced the Medellín homicide database, which is available online

(<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/6c30d1bf0036428c8e868c4d07b50374>).



The data were compiled by the commune and district of the city.

Variables: The databases included nominal variables, such as the sociodemographic characteristics of complainants (Male, Female, Partner, Community, Anonymous), which did not incorporate a gender differential perspective. Other variables included the location of incidents, the principles of freedom violated in animals according to the reports, frequency of abuse or violation events, type of abuse (companion animal, production animal, wildlife), species of abused animals, type of intervention by authorities, frequency of reports involving special-handling canines, risk factors related to the abuse event, and the frequency of additional behaviors or events associated with the report.

Execution Details: The inspection provided the research team with publicly accessible and unrestricted records that did not affect the investigations or compromise the privacy of those involved. The research team cleaned the data to ensure quality, and data processing was conducted in 2023.

Statistical Procedures: Nominal scale variables were analyzed using absolute and relative frequency. Data were processed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007 (Microsoft Corporation). Data cleaning and analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 (IBM Corp). Released 2012. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 19.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.) and licensed by the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana.

To map the abuse, addresses from the database were used, and the data were converted using the OpenCage geocoding tool and R software. The resulting maps were generated using QGIS and compared with the 2023 homicide data for Medellín. Additionally, R software was used to perform correlations between the number of homicides and abuse reports at the commune level using Spearman's rho (r_s), according to the distribution of the data.

Ethical Considerations: This study was classified as minimal risk according to Resolution 008430 of the Colombian Ministry of Health. Approval was granted by the Animal Bioethics Committee of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Corporación Universitaria Remington on March 23, 2022, as documented in Act 03-2022, authorising the project's execution. Fundamental ethical principles were upheld, and the information of the complainants and accused individuals was handled with confidentiality and discretion.



RESULTS

The analysis revealed that of the total number of reports, 13.1% (n=42) were filed by men, 32.4% (n=104) by women, 53% (n=170) by groups or communities, 1.2% (n=4) by anonymous reports, and 0.3% (n=1) by couples.

Of these reports, 93.8% pertained to incidents occurring within the city of Medellín, while the remaining 6.2% were related to animal abuse incidents distributed across its five corregimientos: 2.8% of cases in San Antonio de Prado, 2.2% in San Cristóbal, 0.9% in Santa Elena, 0.3% in Altavista, and 0% in San Sebastián de Palmitas.

Regarding the freedoms violated, 29% (n=93) of the reports were related to violations of the freedom to be free from hunger, thirst, and malnutrition; 27.1% (n=87) related to violations of the freedom from fear and distress; 15.6% (n=50) related to physical and thermal discomfort; 12.5% (n=40) to ensure animals were free from pain, injury, and disease; 12.1% (n=39) to maintain the freedom for animals to express natural behaviors; and 3.7% (n=12) were associated with neighborhood conflicts related to noise (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of Main Causes of Reports

Category	Cases (n)	% Total	of Cumulative %
Presumed inadequate health condition	135	42.1%	42.1%
Inadequate space for keeping	2	0.6%	42.7%
Presumed abandonment	45	14.0%	56.7%
Presumed accumulation of animals	38	11.8%	68.5%
Presumed physical abuse (owner to animal)	26	8.1%	76.6%
Presumed aggression towards animals or training for aggression	20	6.2%	82.9%
Presumed exploitation or breeding	7	2.2%	85.0%
Presumed noise	12	3.7%	88.8%
Other events related to attempted poisoning	36	11.2%	100.0%

Of the total number of reported cases, 94.4% (n=303) involved both conventional and unconventional companion animals. Meanwhile, 5.3% (n=17) were related to domesticated animals used for production



or exploitation, and 0.3% (n=1) involved other categories. Among these, 77.3% (n=248) of the reports concerned canines, 7.2% (n=23) were related to domesticated felines, 3.1% (n=10) involved poultry, 0.9% (n=3) were equines, 0.9% (n=3) were rodents, 0.3% (n=1) involved goats, and 7.8% (n=25) of the reports referred to cases of abuse involving multiple species.

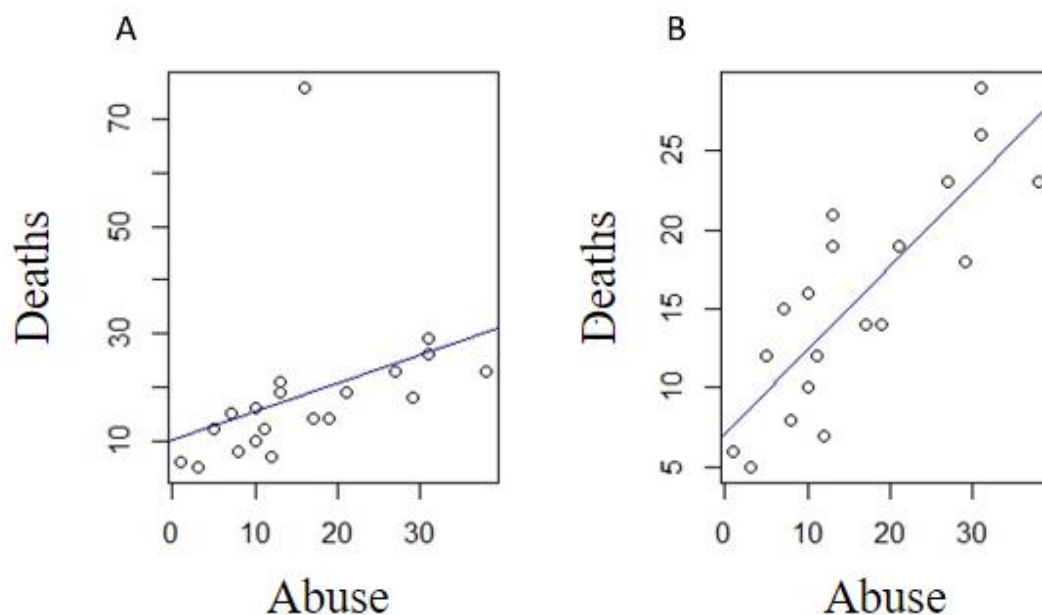
Of the total canine-related cases, 31% (n=79) involved dogs that required special management. Risk factors such as cohabitation with vulnerable individuals were identified in 3.4% (n=11) of the reports. Other risk factors included lack of prior knowledge or experience of responsible animal ownership (1.2%, n=4), lack of resources for responsible animal ownership (2.5%, n=8), history of aggressive behavior (1.2%, n=4), substance abuse (0.3%, n=1), and history of interpersonal violence (0.6%, n=2). The authorities were unable to substantiate the occurrence of animal abuse in 29.9 % (n = 96) of the cases. In 48.9% (n=157) of the cases, no intervention was possible because of external factors beyond the control of authorities. Educational interventions were conducted in 13.7% (n=55) of the cases, whereas only 7.5% (n=24) resulted in animal relocation (Table 2).

Table 2. Type of Intervention by Authorities

Category	Events	%	% Cumulative
No intervention (no abuse demonstrated)	96	29.9%	29.9%
Education	44	13.7%	43.6%
Relocation	24	7.5%	51.1%
No intervention (due to external factors)	157	48.9%	100.0%

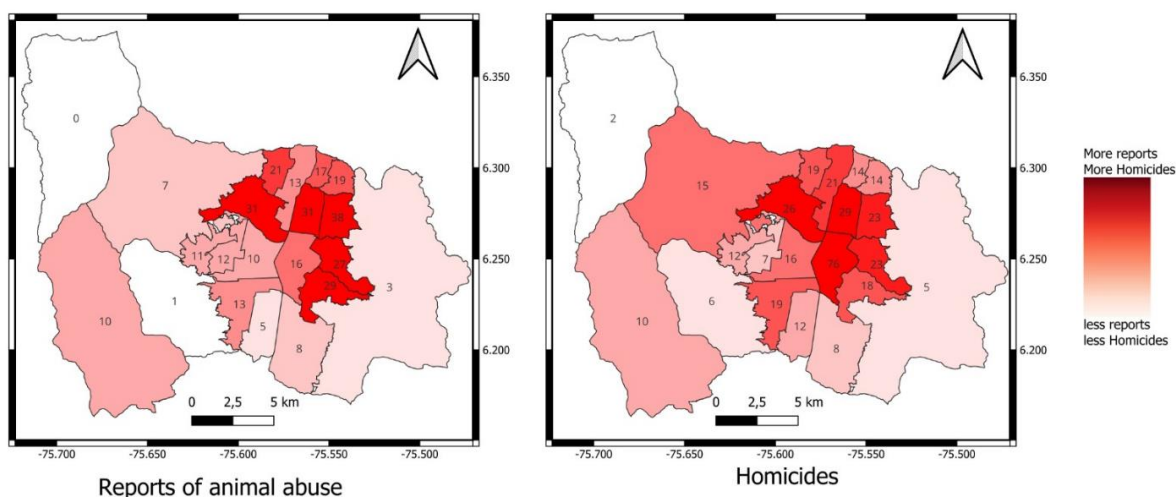
Initially, a correlation of 0.777 was found using the raw data; however, an outlier was identified when the results were graphed. When this outlier was excluded, the correlation increased to 0.823 (Figure 1), indicating a significant correlation between these two variables.

Figure 1: Relationship between the number of reported animal abuse cases in Medellín (X-axis) and the number of human homicides in the same year (Y-axis). A) The graph shows the trend considering all districts, with one noticeable outlier corresponding to District 10. B) The graph shows the trend after removing the outlier, resulting in a more central alignment of the data points.



Corresponding maps were created to spatially represent each case (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Comparative heat maps illustrating the absolute frequency of animal abuse reports and human homicides in Medellín in 2023. The maps reveal similar distribution patterns, indicating that both types of events are concentrated in specific areas of the city, suggesting a potential spatial correlation between these forms of violent behavior.



Discussion and conclusions

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is the most violent region in the world. Despite having less than 9% of the global population, the region accounts for 33% of all recorded homicide cases. With an

annual homicide rate of 24 per 100,000 inhabitants, the LAC is more than three times the global average, six times higher than that of the U.S., and 20 times higher than that of the U.K.. While the LAC remains the only region where violence levels have remained high and increased since 2005 (Jaitman et al., 2017; Jaitman & Anauati, 2020), the phenomenon of violence against animals is also complex and has been understudied, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite the existence of legal frameworks that criminalize animal cruelty, there are still very few studies on this issue in these regions. This research gap makes it challenging to define the factors that contribute to such violence, such as potential risks, situations that foster violence, motivations, types of cruelty, and characteristics of perpetrators. Although studies like this one are simple and have limitations, they contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon and may help in developing strategies for its prevention and management, and possibly the creation of early warning systems to prevent other forms of violence in the future.

This study found that 53% (n=170) of the reports were filed by a group of people or a community. When we inquired with officials from the inspection office about this category in the data records, they explained that it refers to events reported through social networks, virtual platforms, or phone calls, where the complainant does not take ownership of the report itself. These reports do not explicitly request anonymity but fail to provide sufficient information to characterize the complainant's identity. Additionally, 1.2% of reports were classified as anonymous, and 0.3% were filed under the category of "couple." This resulted in a cumulative 54.5% of reports that did not allow for a precise description of the complainant's profile.

This situation may be due to the fact that in Colombia, citizens often do not report crimes they have witnessed or experienced. According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), in the latest update of the Citizen Coexistence and Security Survey, 69.8% of Colombians refrain from filing complaints for various reasons, such as lack of evidence, distrust in authorities, fear of the implications of engaging in a legal or bureaucratic process, or fear of possible retaliation from the accused (DANE 2021). In addition, the lack of a reporting culture in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, is linked to the minimization or disregard of certain crimes and acts of violence. This phenomenon is also strongly associated with democratic stability, corruption perception, and police presence. Additional research shows a connection between trust in authorities, particularly the police



and the justice system, and the willingness to report crimes. Other factors that influence the decision to report a crime include the victim's socioeconomic characteristics, such as per capita GDP, educational level, and relationship with the perpetrator (Bowles et al., 2009; Jaitman et al., 2017; Jaitman & Anauati, 2020; Jones, 2019; Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2011; Murphy & Barkworth, 2014; Soares, 2004; Soares & Naritomi, 2010; Tarling & Morris, 2010).

While the community shows concern about violence against animals, there is reluctance to engage beyond the initial report, which complicates the investigation process and hinders a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of animal violence.

Regarding the remaining reports, citizens assumed responsibility for their complaints, with 13.1% (n=42) initiated by men and 32.4% (n=104) by women. This is noteworthy because previous studies have reported higher empathy levels in women when interacting with both humans and non-human animals (Angantyr et al., 2011; Colombo et al., 2017; Graça et al., 2018; Lockwood, 1999; Martín et al., 2023; Plant et al., 2019). In Colombia, only one study found that 78.2% of the users at a legal clinic for animal rights were women (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2018).

Of these, 93.8% were in the urban area of Medellín, with the remainder distributed across the five rural districts (corregimientos) of the city. This disparity may be due to underreporting or other factors that were not explored in this study, such as cultural aspects, education, and patient awareness. Notably, 32.7% of the animal violence reports originated from the northeastern districts of the city, 22.4% from the central-eastern district, 20.2% from the northwestern districts, 10.2% from the central-western districts, 5.6% from the southwestern districts, 2.5% from the southeastern district, and 6.2% from rural districts.

When observing the distribution of animal violence reports, a similar pattern emerged as with other forms of violence in the city (Figure 2), such as homicides, thefts, domestic violence, and femicides. However, this study did not conduct an analysis to establish correlations of this nature, which should be considered in future research. A strong relationship between neighborhood conditions, such as economic stress, unemployment, deterioration, and crime, and the incidence of animal cruelty has been demonstrated. Establishing these relationships could contribute to the development of potential policy actions to combat animal cruelty and prevent other forms of violence (Reese et al., 2020).

The literature indicates that cruelty is strongly associated with neighborhood conditions (Burchfield, 2018; Plant et al., 2019; Reese et al., 2020; Warner, 2003). Cruelty tends to be more prevalent in areas with a higher number of vacant and deteriorating buildings, elevated crime rates (particularly homicides), fewer construction permits, and a lack of green spaces for recreation (Reese et al., 2020). These factors suggest potential connections between the physical and social conditions of a neighborhood and cruelty rates.

Social disorganization theory posits that structural disadvantages in a community, such as poverty and lack of education and opportunities, weaken social bonds, diminish social control, and reduce consensus against crime (Warner, 2003). The literature suggests that these factors may contribute to higher rates of animal cruelty in disorganized areas (Burchfield, 2018; Reese et al., 2020). The weakening of social bonds and reduced capacity for collective efficacy in these neighborhoods create environments where cruelty can proliferate, potentially extending to other forms of violence.

In Medellín, social cohesion and collective efficacy are positively associated with disadvantage, disorder, and violence. This highlights the importance of considering neighborhood conditions when analyzing animal cruelty, as disorganized and disadvantaged environments may significantly contribute to the incidence of such phenomena. Understanding and establishing these relationships could be crucial for developing effective strategies for preventing and managing animal cruelty and other forms of violence (Cerdeña & Morenoff, 2008; Doyle, 2016; Escobar, 2012).

Understanding these connections is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies. By addressing the underlying neighborhood conditions that foster cruelty, it may be possible to reduce not only instances of animal cruelty but also broader patterns of violence within these communities.

This study is the first of its kind in Colombia, specifically in Medellín. Although the findings are limited, they contribute to the understanding of violence against animals and its correlation with other forms of violence, offering potential as an early warning system for prevention and protection of life.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest was reported by the author(s).



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