



Bestiality: The best kept secret in America

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Abstract

For most people, the concept of humans “having sex with” animals is abhorrent or taboo. As a result, sexually interested in animals (zoophilia) or acting on that interest (bestiality) is seldom researched, studied, or openly discussed. Abundant historical and anthropological evidence, however, suggests that bestiality and zoophilia have existed for millennia, with studies throughout the mid-1990’s estimating that 3-8% of the general population has had sexual contact with an animal at some point. While recent revisions of the DSM and the ICD have moved away from the consideration of zoophilia as a form of sexual perversion or clinical disorder, judicial systems throughout the world have increasingly criminalized bestiality. This dichotomy presents practical implications for criminal justice, legal, medical, and mental health professionals. A recently published study of 456 bestiality-related incidents in the United States suggests that zoophilia and bestiality are likely more prevalent and more serious than we realize, deserving of more serious attention by medical, mental health, and legal communities. Study results indicated the level of sexual contact with an animal was extremely varied - ranging from production and distribution of animal pornography to violent penetrative acts typically resulting in the death of the animal, and in at least one case, the death of a person. In addition, there were notable, if not significant, correlations between sex acts with animals and antisocial or criminal acts such as child sexual abuse, interpersonal violence, substance abuse, and the consumption of child pornography. A finding of interest was that forensic evaluations, civil commitments, or mental health services were utilized in only 5% of the incidents. Among those receiving mental health evaluations, one person had a known brain injury; another had previously been involuntarily committed to state mental health care; 7 were violent offenders; 13 had previously been evaluated as part of the sex offender registry process; and only 2 were diagnosed as zoophilic. The broad range of sexual interest and contact, combined with the limited focus on mental healthcare, point to a need for additional research to better understand causes, treatment, and intervention protocols related to zoophilia and bestiality.



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