Dog Fighting and the Growing Social Epidemic of Animal Cruelty
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ABSTRACT

Cases of animal cruelty have gained much attention in recent years, due in part to increased numbers being reported and the use of social media in reporting such cases. Sadly, thousands of domesticated animals (i.e., primarily horses, dogs, and cats) are victims of cruelty every year. Exact numbers are unknown, because a national reporting system does not currently exist. However, the number of cruelty cases reported each year indicates that a real problem exists. Additional areas of concern include correlations between animal cruelty and other criminal activities, to include abuse and neglect against humans.

Keywords: abuse, bait animals, cruelty, companion animals, dog fighting, hoarding, neglect, trunking
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Over 60% of U.S. households have domesticated pets as companion animals (e.g., dogs, cats, and horses) (Animal Rescue Corps, n.d.). Even with America’s love of animals, thousands of domesticated animals become victims of cruelty every year in the U.S. and abroad. For every reported case of cruelty, many more cases go unreported. Unreported or under-reported cases of animal cruelty are often the result of ambiguity in the law, a lack of standardization and enforceability of the law (e.g., from state to state and county to county), and often, individuals afraid to speak up when they witness or suspect abuse or neglect.

Types of Animal Cruelty

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [ASPCA] categorizes animal cruelty into two distinct classifications: intentional and unintentional or neglect (Britt, n.d., as cited in Petfinder, n.d.). Intentional cruelty is the intentional infliction of “… physical harm or injury on an animal” (Britt, n.d., para. 8). Intentional types of abuse and cruelty include, but are not limited to: ritualistic abuse, torture, sexual abuse, and organized fighting (Duke, 2006).

Stray Rescue Founder Randy Grim is no stranger to intentional acts of abuse and cruelty against animals. Grim deals with hundreds of cases each year in the St. Louis and Illinois metro area. There is the case of OP, “a dog that had been shot 12 times, strangled with an electrical cord, and tossed in a dumpster to die” (Cooperman, 2013, p. 2, para. 5). Many cases stand out to Grim, but just last year he was involved in a horrific case involving a mixed breed dog named Brownie (Stray Rescue, 2013). Brownie was intentionally set on fire and ultimately succumbed to his injuries. Unfortunately, Brownie’s case is not the exception, but rather the norm (R. Grim, personal communication, May 2, 2014). The persistence of Grim and many others in trying to get justice for these animals led to the creation of “…. St. Louis’ first Animal Cruelty Task Force” (Cooperman, 2013, p. 3, para. 2).

Unintentional cruelty includes: hoarding, abandonment, and continuous chaining that result in environmental exposure or social isolation (Humane Society of the United States [HSUS], n.d.). In the most basic sense, unintentional abuse or neglect is the failing to “... provide food, water, shelter, and veterinary care” (ASPCA, n.d.). The difference between many cases of intentional and unintentional abuse or neglect is that unintentional neglect is often the result of ignorance and can frequently be remedied by educating owners. In addition, individuals involved in cases of intentional cruelty may conceal abused and neglected animals from the view of neighbors, animal control officers, and law enforcement personnel. Animals may also be hidden if they are sick or hurt and in need of veterinarian care, living in filthy conditions, or if there are signs of fighting (i.e., cuts, lacerations, broken bones, scars, tail docking, teeth sharpening, steroid injections,
and ear cropping) (C. Singleton, personal communication, April 19, 2014). Animals may also be concealed if the number of animals exceeds the number allowed by law (e.g., hoarding cases and puppy mills). One type of intentional animal cruelty, which has received growing attention, is dog fighting.

**History of Dog Fighting**

Dog fighting has existed since the 1700s and actually grew in popularity during the Civil War (ASPCA Professional, 2014). The ASPCA Professional (2014) points out that dog fighting was “… common entertainment for police officers and firemen, and the ‘Police Gazette’ served as a major source of information on dog fighting for many years” (p. 1, para. 3). Public opinion regarding this form of “entertainment” initially failed to see the crime in dogfighting. This was due in part to the fact that evidence of such activity was hidden and those responsible for such activity were rarely, if ever, prosecuted (Lockwood, 2012).

Societal views on dog fighting have changed dramatically in the past decade (Lockwood, 2012). A large reason for this shift involved the dog fighting case of former Atlanta Falcons Quarterback Michael Vick. Vick was charged with “… one count of unlawfully torturing and killing dogs and one of promoting dogfights” (CNN, 2007). Vick lied to a judge regarding his participation in the illegal dog fighting ring and eventually was convicted and sentenced to 23 months in prison (Fox News, 2007).

The shift in public opinion regarding this blood sport has caused many involved to go underground in order to remain off the radar of law enforcement, animal rights organizations, and animal protective agencies. Dog fighting and animal abuse alone are not the only concern facing legislators and law enforcement agencies. “Dog fighting is almost inseparable from drugs, illegal weapons, illegal gambling, and many other activities...” (Lockwood, 2012, p. 4).

According to USLegal (2014), “Dog fighting is an illegal practice in which two dogs, usually of a Pit Bull breed are put into an enclosed area for the purpose of attacking and quite frequently, killing each other” (para. 1). The most commonly used dogs associated with dog fighting and associated activities include: American pit bull terriers, Staffordshire bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, Presa Canarios, and bulldogs (Discovery Communications, LLC, 2011). In addition, bets are placed on which dog will prevail. Fights last approximately an hour, but can go on for several hours until one dog is unable to continue or dies. It is not unheard of for a losing dog to be used as “bait” or to be killed for not fighting to an owner’s expectations (People for the Ethical treatment of Animals [PETA], 2014).

**Bait Animals.** As if the illegal activity of dog fighting were not gruesome enough, the abuse and torture that often faces “bait” animals is almost incomprehensible. Oftentimes, these defenseless animals have their teeth shaved down to the gums, mouths taped shut, and are often beaten and tortured, all before they face certain death as bait for

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1 The National Police Gazette, known as the *Police Gazette*, was a popular tabloid-like publication for men that highlighted events and such and helped the police catch bad guys. “… [E]ach issue contained lists of names of alleged offenders, their aliases, physical appearances, and in some cases even their home addresses” (McKay, 2013).
Dog fighting dogs (Adams, 2011). Any animal can be used as bait, but some animals are at greater risk. The ideal bait animal is seen as weak and defenseless. Smaller animals are preferred because they cannot defend themselves.

Oftentimes, bait animals are stolen from loving homes or animal holding facilities, and some are even located on free websites like Craigslist or in local newspapers. It is highly recommended that animals not be advertised as “free” or “free to good home” on places like Craigslist. Many of these websites are trolled by those engaged in such illegal activities. Many animals advertised on websites like these become victims of abuse, neglect, torture, and many are killed (Bindley, 2012). Some of the animals are acquired and given to laboratories, some are acquired specifically for the use as bait animals, and many more are used to fight, either in cage fights or in trunking cases.

**Trunking.** The act of ‘trunking’ is part of the ever-illusive world of dog fighting. So illusive, that many have never heard of it before. One of the biggest problems with trunking, according to Grim, is that it is very difficult to catch while it is occurring. Grim often deals with recovered animals and animals that are located after such abuse has occurred. Trunking involves two dogs being thrown literally into the trunk of a vehicle. The vehicles occupants will drive around for 15-30 minutes, allowing the dogs time to fight. Oftentimes, the vehicles radio will be turned up loud, so not to bring attention to the dogfight going on inside the trunk (Pet Pulse, 2008). Trunking is more popular on the east coast, but inner cities are also growing areas of concern (Pet Pulse, 2008). Dogfighting is seen on three distinct levels.

- **Level 1:** Dog on dog street fighting with minimal monetary gain.
- **Level 2:** Fighting in abandoned buildings or garages, usually including a known gang element and often involve thousands of dollars in monetary gain.
- **Level 3:** Sophisticated dogfighting rings (e.g., pits, spectators, and referees) where hundreds of thousands of dollars can be made. This is the type of operation ran by Michael Vick (Pet Pulse, 2008).

Distinguishing between the levels of dogfighting depends on the amount of involvement with fighting and spectators, the amount monies involved (i.e., placing bets and investments into animals and equipment), the paraphernalia associated with such activity, and the overall sophistication level.

**Paraphernalia.** Dog fighting paraphernalia is some of the best evidence needed to make a case against those who partake in this illegal activity. Paraphernalia in regards to dog fighting includes, but is not limited to such things as fighting pens, collars, printed material, photos, or videos about dog fighting, buckets, sponges, wooden handles and prying sticks, restraints, registration papers, breeding record, business contact information (e.g., other dog fighters), hidden pits, and carpet coverings to hide pits, treadmills, and medical supplies (ASPCA, 2010).

Making a case against dog fighting can be very difficult. Oftentimes, law enforcement officers have limited exposure to these types of crimes and are not trained to deal with larger scale operations. In order to successfully prosecute such crimes, those working these cases need to understand the inner and outer workings (e.g., collecting,
labeling, and storing evidence) and being able to articulate how each piece of evidence was used in the commission of a crime.

Assisting LE in Making Cases against Dogfighting

Cracking down on dog fighting and other criminal activity that often coincides with dog fighting means that law enforcement must identify and articulate the inner workings of such illegal activity. Grim is used as an expert witness in many of the animal abuse cases in the St. Louis metro area and acts as an advocate for law enforcement by sharing intelligence on issues surrounding dog fighting, abuse, and neglect. In addition, Stray Rescue, the St. Louis Animal Cruelty Task Force, and local law enforcement have issued over 300 citations and made approximately 40 arrests, which include felony convictions with prison time (R. Grim, personal communication, May 2, 2014). Grim explained that many of the individuals behind the abuse and cruelty are no strangers to law enforcement. Many of these individuals have extensive criminal records, which often include prior animal abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence (R. Grim, personal communication, May 2, 2014).

Detective Jeffrey Hartsoe of the St. Clair County Sheriff’s Department explained that patrol officers are key in intercepting these types of crimes. Officers must become very familiar with the areas they patrol. More than likely, officers will not be walking into a dog fight or a dog fighting ring. In reality, they may come across elements of a crime (i.e., vicious dogs, dogs on short chains, cages, abused or injured animals) while on other routine calls for service. It is extremely important for officers to be aware of their surroundings and to recognize paraphernalia and elements associated with dog fighting and other illegal activities.

Officers should survey the area and all occupants (e.g., human and animal) when on calls for service, to determine if any welfare issues exist. Make note of multiple vehicles and animals on property. Some states actually prevent felons from owning dangerous dogs and some states have additional restrictions on felons owning ‘dangerous’ dogs, including not possessing dogs over a certain weight and requiring dogs to be spayed or neutered (J. Hartsoe, personal communication, May 2, 2014). Dogs owned by those partaking in such illegal activity may not only be for sport, but for protection and additional income. Inquire about state laws and regulations regarding animal cruelty, dog fighting, and felons in possession dangerous animals. According to Gibson (2005):

Although all states have dog-fighting laws in addition to the general anti-cruelty statutes, dog-fighting involves acts that both violate the specific dog-fighting laws as well as the more general anti-cruelty statutes…. Certain jurisdictions are very specific about requiring that the defendants be charged under the dog-fighting statute as opposed to the anti-cruelty statute, others encourage charges arising under both statutes when appropriate and in some cases, there may be insufficient evidence to bring charges under one statute, but sufficient evidence for a charge under the other statute. (para. 4)

As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of standardization in the law, so elements of the crime and the evidence required in making a case for abuse, cruelty, and neglect will
Dog Fighting and the Growing Social Epidemic /Johnson

differ. Remember that those involved in dog fighting are often well versed in the law and the punishments. “The dogfighting underground is well-connected through publications, Internet Communications and word-of-mouth. Fighters follow the arrest and trial of other fighters and any successful defense strategies are quickly disseminated throughout the network” (ASPCA, 2010, p. 3, para. 4). With this in mind, those involved in the judicial system must also see how successful cases are prosecuted as well and what other means can be used to prosecute such crimes (e.g., RICO).

Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, known as RICO, was initially developed to keep criminal activity from penetrating into legitimate business (Flood & McGough, 1987). Revisions to the RICO Act led to a broader scope of criminal activity to include “…. all forms of ‘enterprise criminality’ (Flood & McGough, 1987). “Under Illinois' new state-level RICO statute, … dogfighting is among dozens of offenses… that could be used as evidence in the prosecution of an organized criminal enterprise” (Meyer, 2012, para. 8). This new statute will “… crack down on dogfighting rings and can conceivably disassemble the organizations behind them” (Meyer, 2012, para. 9). Anyone involved in prosecuting such crimes must be aware of available resources and how such resources can aid in successful prosecution.

Conclusion

It is difficult to comprehend animal abuse and neglect in a country with domesticated animals in over half of U.S. households, and where millions of dollars are spent annually on the purchase and care of these animals. However, millions of animals are euthanized each year in the U.S., because of pet over-population and owners who are unable or unwilling to care for their pets (American Humane Association, 2013). These cases are worrisome, but the behaviors displayed by those partaking in (e.g., dog fighters, referees, and spectators) such blood sports as dog fighting and trunking are even more so. Many of these individuals will use, abuse, and kill animals for attention and monetary gain.

Individuals involved in the illegal activity of dog fighting and associated crimes are the menaces of society. These individuals are often able to evade animal protective agencies and law enforcement by taking illegal activities underground. Many reasons exist, as to why this blood sport continues to grow in numbers and popularity. This is due in part to law ambiguity and a lack of standardization, and those witnessing abuse and neglect are often too afraid to speak up. In addition, dog fighting is a lucrative business and those involved in such activity are often involved in other illegal activity. Such networks of crime and criminal activity are able to thrive because of the sheer number of participants and their ability to stay hidden.

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Additional Resources
(DICLAIMER: Some of the provided content is graphic in nature and should not be shared or viewed in the presence of individuals under the age of 18):

*Hidden in Darkness: ‘Trunking is Dog Fighting’s Ugly Secret.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_sFNVk1KVY

- Resources for Law Enforcement – The Humane Society of the United States
  http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/abuse_neglect/resources_law_enforcement.html
- A Guidebook to Investigating Animal Cruelty:
  http://www.canineencounters.com/ce2013_005.htm
- Taking Action to Stop Dog Fighting:
  http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/dogfighting/tips/dogfighting_action.html#
Ux3J93nByIw
- Dog Fighting: A Guide for Community Action -
- http://therealapbt.blogspot.com/2013/01/dog-fighting-paraphernalia.html

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