

Animal Cruelty & Fighting

Captured 7/1/2010

- Animal Cruelty
- Dogfighting
- Cockfighting
- Hog-dog fighting

- Victories
- Resources
- News & Press
- Multimedia
- Legal Action
- Legislation
- Donate
- About Us

HSUS >> Animal Cruelty and Fighting >> News and Press

A Nation in the Ring (Part 3: Pit Bulls as Currency)

September 7, 2007

By Nancy Lawson

From Part 2 of the series: Dogfighters know no boundaries—as Conlan says, "it is international, it is interracial, it is intereconomic"—so police need to form networks of their own to catch them.



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Leslie Harris and The HSUS's Ann Chynoweth greet a puppy rescued by violence interrupter Antonio Pickett.

While professional fighters in organized rings enjoy middle class lifestyles and gamble thousands of dollars on their animals, streetfighters often grow up in a world of poverty, guns and drugs. Role models are few, save the gang members whose dogfighting activities are glorified by hip-hop artists like Jay-Z and DMX.

Under such dire circumstances, many children don't envision living past their 20s, says Elliott Serrano, a community outreach specialist for the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago. One participant in Serrano's anti-dogfighting workshop at a youth correctional facility was killed by a gang member the day he was released on parole.

"You're talking about kids who have very few options in life," says Serrano. "They don't know that there's something beyond this. They are being brought up in an environment where they can be killed any time."

Dogfighting: A National Epidemic

1. The Dogs and the Territory
2. The Costs of Dogfighting
3. Pit Bulls as Currency

An Anti-Cruelty Society survey found that one in five children in Chicago has seen a dogfight. Other estimates put that number at four out of five. The figures seem impossibly high—until you see battle-scarred pit bulls cruising the streets at the heels of 10-year-old boys.

Pit bulls are a kind of currency in the dogfighting world, their value assessed by how much cash their jaws or genes will earn. Peddling puppies can prove as lucrative as dealing drugs; one Ohio dogfighter traded selling cocaine for breeding pit bulls, recalls Franklin County deputy dog warden Rob Lambert, because the profits were higher. A symbol of strength and status, the dogs become accessories, forced to wear heavy chains because, as one young Columbus man with a scarred pit bull puts it, "it's the kind of collar you would put on a bully dog. It looks good."

It's an attitude Antonio Pickett knows well. Recently hired by HSUS consultant and community advocate Tio Hardiman, Pickett grew up on Chicago's northwest side and once had his own share of

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troubles with the law. Working as a "violence interrupter" who tries to wean kids away from dogfighting, he has already piqued children's interests in **dog behavior** training and other humane alternatives to fighting. "They [need] something else to do with their dogs..." Pickett says. "They're always asking, 'When are you going to bring the trainer?'"

Stopping the Violence

Working with police and ministers, the Dog Advisory Working Group (D.A.W.G.) is providing an answer to that question, holding sessions that teach kids about humane treatment and demonstrate dog agility. Initially scared, children clamor to pet the dogs by session's end, says Cynthia Bathurst, executive director and court advocacy chair of the Chicago nonprofit.

Ending dogfighting requires not just strong penalties but social remedies. In a nation of haves and have-nots where Americans spend billions each year on their pets, many children languish in the streets without help or hope. Pit bulls represent status, style and instant gratification. It is too easy to look away, but humane officers, police, community activists and **organizations like The HSUS are confronting the problem head-on.**

Help The HSUS Fight Back

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"This is about stopping the violence," says Bathurst. "When you understand how all of this violence is interconnected and how it has to do with respect in some ways for oneself and for other living beings, then you can get the whole community engaged."

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