

Dog fighting remains a well-hidden secret

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Muncie's infamous reputation as one of the dog-fighting hubs of the Midwest hasn't lessened in recent years, despite the best efforts of animal lovers statewide.

Four pit bulls were seized Feb. 1 after police found the malnourished dogs locked in a kennel outside a home in the Old West End neighborhood. When police arrived, they found one of the dogs biting and ripping flesh from another, according to a police report. The owner was cited for the possession of animals for fighting contests.

The pit bulls, which have a 10-day bail period, are still being held at the Muncie Animal Shelter.

The breed is a familiar one at the shelter, where officials say they receive about 15 to 20 dogs a year that have obvious fighting scars -- most of them pit bulls.

"It's hard to say if the scars are from organized fights or enjoyment between the dogs," said Bob Patterson, an animal control officer at the shelter. "I think the fighting going on right now is more of a disorganized macho thing."

"The more organized the less evidence you find because the (fighters) cover up the tracks from the public."

That disorganized venue might be the only silver lining in what is a big-impact crime.

"Dog fighting is not just an animal issue," said Jill Dolon, founder of Unconditional Love Foundation, a volunteer-run animal rescue, shelter and rehabilitation group in Muncie. "You also have guns, drugs and kids going to the shows, which is causing lack of empathy among them. If you're not kind to animals, you're often not kind to people."

The Humane Society estimates that nearly 40,000 people participate in dog fighting nationally, which can amount to thousands of dollars from admission fees and gambling at one event.

"I know dog fighting is happening in Indiana, and more often than people realize," said Anne Sterling, the Humane Society's Indiana state director. "I think it's definitely something the state needs to look at."

Indiana is one of the few remaining states where it is not a felony to be a spectator at a dogfight, Sterling said.

Several attempts have been made to create stricter animal fighting regulations, most recently Senate Bill 23, which has not yet received a hearing.

SB 23, which was first introduced last year, would increase penalties for engaging in animal fighting to a Class C felony, authorize the seizure of profits and increase the penalties for possessing animals or paraphernalia used for dog fighting.

Determining if dogs are just aggressive or if they're being used for dog fighting, however, is a difficult task. And because pit bulls are the most common fighting dog, they're getting a bad reputation of being aggressive to humans.

"When people think of dog fighting they think of pit bulls, and then they get scared of the breed," Dolon said. "The dogs that are bred by professional dog fighters should never hurt humans though, because the owners don't tolerate human aggressiveness. If the dogs are ever aggressive toward humans they are euthanized immediately."

That puts shelters between a rock and a hard place when it comes to dealing with stray and abandoned animals.

If dogs in the local shelter are not bailed out after the 10-day period, each one is assessed for its attitude and health to determine what is done with it, Patterson said.

"About 99.9 percent of the dogs are too aggressive to be adopted out," he said.

There's also fear that new owners will use breeds such as pit bulls inappropriately, training them to be the killers they are stereotyped to be.

Dolon said she has been to several shelters in different states that have been overrun with animals, but they aren't adopted out because of what the public does with them.

"After the Michael Vicks case people wanted to help pits, which is good, but they don't understand the big picture," Dolon said. "Not every dog can be placed."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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