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National

Beyond Greyhound Abuse In Macau: In The United States, Dog Racing In Sharp Decline

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In Florida, a greyhound dies every three days on a race track.

Those deaths generally bring an end to bleak lives. The dogs live in small cages alongside hundreds or thousands of other dogs. They get out to stretch for only a few hours a day. And, should they not die on the track or get lucky and get adopted, many are ultimately put down when their owners make a calculation unfathomable to most pet owners: They're no longer bringing in money.

The recent charges levied against [179 Australian greyhound trainers](#) and owners accused of illegally exporting their dogs to Macau, the site of one of the most notorious tracks in the world, bring attention once again to the exploitation of professional dogs, many of which are raced to the death. But poor conditions aren't unique to that small Chinese peninsula. Even after decades of humanitarian activism, the United States — alongside Australia and Britain — remains one of the biggest markets for dog racing. It is an industry that has persisted despite plummeting revenues, dwindling public interest and vocal opposition from activists who point out the many ways the dogs are being exploited.

"It's not popular. People don't go anymore. It costs the state more money now to regulate it than it brings in tax revenues," said Kate MacFall, Florida director for the Humane Society of the United States. "Most young people will look at you like you're nuts if you ask them if they've been to a greyhound race."

Greyhound racing became legal in the United States in 1931, when Florida approved the practice. Throughout the 20th century it rose in popularity, expanding to more than 60 operating dog tracks at its peak. But, since the early 1990s, when betting on the races totaled \$3.5 billion a year, betting and the number of tracks has dwindled. Today, there are just 19 tracks operating in only five states. Those are anchored by 12 tracks in Florida that were [effectively subsidized](#) by other means of gambling when spectators began showing up less and less for the races, which are required by law to take place regardless of whether anyone is at the track and betting. Yearly betting on greyhound races now makes up about [\\$600,000 a year](#) in the U.S.

The [four states](#) other than Florida where dog racing tracks still operate are Iowa, Arkansas, Alabama and West Virginia. The sport, if one calls it that, is banned in 40 states.

Even with the limited number of states, a [staggering number of dogs are affected](#) in the country. Between 2008 and 2015, there were 11,722 greyhounds injured (including more than 3,000 that suffered from broken legs, crushed heads, broken backs or paralysis), 909 greyhound deaths (though the real number is unknown, because of weak reporting requirements) and 27 cases of cruelty or neglect (including pups that were starved to death or denied veterinary care).

During that time, more than 80,000 young greyhounds have entered the racing market and, although the breed naturally lives to 13 years of age or more, they generally retire anywhere between 18 months and 5 years old. Some are sent to rescue groups. Others are killed. For others, "retirement" is death on the track.

This week, 179 greyhound trainers and owners in Australia were charged with violating industry regulations and illegally exporting dogs to Macau, which has been banned since 2013. The charges follow an investigation finding that slower Australian greyhounds were being exported to the Chinese city in what animal welfare activists there say is a "death sentence." In Macau, the animals live at the Canidrome track, where as many as 800 dogs are held and races are held five nights a week on a track that has been criticized as being too hard.

Meanwhile, Australia has its own legal dog racing market that, compared to the U.S. and U.K., is relatively thriving. While Australia has modest growth, a growing sense around the poor treatment of the animals is pulling down the markets in the U.S. and U.K. Humanitarian activists point to the poor living conditions, alongside the food (so-called "4-D" meat, which comes from dying, diseased, disabled or dead livestock), euthanasia after common injuries and the many cruelty cases that have popped up as good reason to ditch the events altogether.

"The U.S. industry is in full-blown collapse," said Carey Theil, executive director for Grey2K, a leading greyhound welfare group based in Massachusetts, noting that the British industry is falling at a slower clip. "The fundamental issue is that they are taking dogs and using them essentially as a means to have people bet millions of dollars on them. In doing so — commercializing these dogs in that way — every single dog ends up being subject to a profit-margin analysis."

And, in a culture like the United States, putting down dogs simply because they broke a leg and may not draw a crowd can be a tough sell. Convincing people to support an industry that resorts to that — when adoption, though it has become more common in the past quarter-century, still can't cover the large numbers — may be too difficult for the industry.

"Can it be viable, economical and at the same time operate in a way that conforms with mainstream values about dogs?" Theil asked, noting that five states have implemented outright bans on dog racing since 2010. "I suspect it can't. I think our success is evidence that it can't."