or years, out of sight of visitors to their online business, Barreto’s Luv-a-Puppy, Janet and Ramon Barreto kept scores of dogs—almost 200 by 2008—behind their double-wide near New Albany, Miss. And also out of sight, hidden in a trailer connected to the mobile home, they kept nine children, seven adopted from Guatemala. According to police records, some of the adopted kids were underweight and malnourished, some beaten, and some duct-taped or tied to their beds. One was punched in the stomach, and one had his head submerged in water. In 2008, a 2-year-old girl the Barretos had adopted died, and the outside world started to ask questions. The couple said the little girl had fallen out of a shopping cart, but Janet’s biological daughter was eventually convicted of throwing the toddler into a crib so hard it killed her.

Janet and Ramon Barreto were charged with child abuse and manslaughter. Instead of showing up in court, they ran. In 2013, the U.S. Marshals Service put Janet Barreto—now also charged with witness tampering—on its list of 15 most wanted fugitives. Last fall, The HSUS was asked to help spread the word in case the Barretos might be caught trying to sell dogs elsewhere.

Is this an isolated case? No. In my work investigating puppy mills for The HSUS, I’ve learned that the same people who endanger the health and lives of dogs for profit often also endanger the health and lives of children (or commit other crimes, including environmental violations; see “Trickle-Down Effects,” p. 32).

Many puppy mill operators behave like hoarders who’ve forgotten how to properly care for other creatures. They don’t see reality: Dogs crawling with fleas and sitting in feces, empty or algae-covered water bowls, animals slowly starving. And this kind of neglect of basic sanitation and the provision of food and medical care can affect their own health and that of their children. Last year in Gates County, N.C., we seized more than 100 animals, including 40 dogs, from a property after someone called the sheriff’s office to report an emaciated horse. There were pugs, Boston terriers and border collies, some outside without proper shelter and some shut up in a building packed with dog feces. Standing in the rain by a farmhouse with peeling paint and a junk-strewn yard there was also a girl of about 12 or 13.

She was crying. She didn’t understand that anything was wrong. (Authorities took her from her parents temporarily.) The puppy mill was the only home she had ever known.

It’s hard to think of children growing...
On the iPad

Watch Tia Pope and other HSUS Animal Rescue Team staff at the February raid of this Arkansas puppy mill.
up like that. But there’s a different sort of case that’s even harder to witness: situations in which children aren’t just neglected, they’re actively abused. News reports and web postings by advocates for adopted children tell of couples who bring children into their homes in order to use them as labor, sometimes in puppy mill operations, and of couples who adopt children and are convicted of animal cruelty.

Last year, I got a call that pulled me into the life of a young man who said he and his two dozen adopted siblings had been abused by their parents, who he says run a puppy mill. He hadn’t been able to get local law enforcement to respond to the abuse of the children, so he was contacting The HSUS in the hope that someone would take action on behalf of the animals. The young man was in his early 20s and living on his own, with a job to support himself, but he couldn’t forget his younger brothers and sisters still trapped on the farm or the approximately 500 dogs living there.

The website through which his adopted parents sell puppies makes the farm look idyllic. However, the young man says he and his siblings were used as forced labor. He says they were made to dig graves for the many unwanted animals their adopted parents shot—or worse, ordered the children to shoot—and, if they complained, were told they themselves might be shot and end up in just such a grave. He says they were beaten with a whip or whatever was at hand. He says many of his siblings were denied necessary medical care because their adopted parents pocketed money provided by the state to treat the children’s health problems.

I met the young man near the airport and drove with him back to the small county where his adopted parents live. There, at the sheriff’s office, he gave an oral affidavit. When I first heard the young man’s story, it was so incredible, I didn’t know whether to believe it. But when we visited the sheriff’s department and I sat there and heard the story from beginning to end, I was convinced. And it was devastating—to know that there were still children on that farm.

Just as before, though, local authorities failed to act. It was like they couldn’t care less. And afterward, the young man got death threats and was followed. One day, outside his apartment, a man beat him up and threatened to kill him if he didn’t retract his statement. When he didn’t, people harassed him at work until he was fired. The young man had risked everything to tell his story, but I could do nothing. Just like the local humane society, which he had also contacted, I didn’t have the authority to go on the property.

Since then, the young man has moved hundreds of miles away. He’s safe, but his brothers and sisters remain on the farm. I think of them often, but I have no evidence that will force local authorities to take action—nothing beyond the man’s word, his adopted parents’ website (which looks like a front for a puppy mill), the online complaints from buyers who purchased sick puppies and couldn’t get their money back, and the many violations documented on government inspection reports (which have gotten far more serious since the state sent an investigator to accompany the regular inspector). A June 2013 inspection found dogs with open sores, raw skin, fly-bitten ears and toenails so long they had trouble walking.

I’m keeping in touch with the young man and hoping. Last year, the USDA issued a rule that could allow federal officials to intervene when corrupt or indifferent local officials won’t act. It requires people who sell large numbers of puppies on the Internet to be federally licensed. If all goes well, USDA inspectors will visit the young man’s adopted parents soon. When they do, I hope that the dogs won’t be the only ones rescued.

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