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# Prison Rehabilitation: The Sociological, Physiological, and Psychological Effects of Animal-Assisted Interventions

## Abstract

This paper examines animal-assisted interventions as a new form of rehabilitation in the prison setting. It focuses specifically on the multiple benefits that this form of therapy/intervention can bring to inmates, such as the reduction in recidivism and the acquirement of new skills. Additionally, this paper considers the reasons for which rehabilitation in general is necessary in order to truly transform an individual. The first section provides a brief history of AAI in the prison environment and its effects on the prisoners. The paper then transitions to an account of analyzing the sociological, physiological, and psychological effects of AAI on prisoners and offers a comparison of the different successful programs as a means to demonstrate their effectiveness and influence on further research. The final section describes the benefits of AAI for the animals, adopters, and community, thereby demonstrating that using Animal-Assisted Therapy in prisons can be beneficial on multiple levels.

## Keywords

prison rehabilitation, animal-assisted interventions, mental health, recidivism

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Psychological Effects of Animal-Assisted Interventions

*Daisy Corleto*

**Abstract**

This paper examines animal-assisted interventions as a new form of rehabilitation in the prison setting. It focuses specifically on the multiple benefits that this form of therapy/intervention can bring to inmates, such as the reduction in recidivism and the acquirement of new skills. Additionally, this paper considers the reasons for which rehabilitation in general is necessary in order to truly transform an individual. The first section provides a brief history of AAI in the prison environment and its effects on the prisoners. The paper then transitions to an account of analyzing the sociological, physiological, and psychological effects of AAI on prisoners and offers a comparison of the different successful programs as a means to demonstrate their effectiveness and influence on further research. The final section describes the benefits of AAI for the animals, adopters, and community, thereby demonstrating that using Animal-Assisted Therapy in prisons can be beneficial on multiple levels.

## Introduction

There has been a longstanding debate on whether prisons should be offering rehabilitation programs for inmates or whether they should take a “tough-on-crime” approach. Some might argue that prisoners simply do not deserve the privilege of such programs, while others believe that offering these forms of rehabilitation would be beneficial to both inmates and society as a whole. Some of the reasons these programs could be beneficial to prisoners are because they help them acquire new skills, help treat their mental problems, and help deal with their anger or violence. These benefits help prisoners cope with their sentence by improving their behavior in prison; upon their release from prison, these benefits can also be seen when they re-enter their respective communities. Rehabilitative programs teach inmates skills that help them successfully reintegrate into society, which therefore decreases their rates of recidivism.

Types of rehabilitation programs that some prisons provide to their inmates include work programs, educational programs, therapy/counseling programs, and transitional programs. For the purpose of this paper, the type of programs that will be discussed will rely primarily on work, transitional, and therapy programs with the use of animals. This paper argues that animal-assisted activities (AAA) are beneficial forms of rehabilitation that profits prisoners, animals, and society. First, the paper will provide a brief history of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) in the prison environment along with the different types of animals and training programs that have been previously used. Second, the paper will examine the sociological, physiological, and psychological effects of AAA on prisoners. Lastly, the paper will further discuss the benefits of

these activities amongst the animals and third parties. In this paper, the term “Animal-Assisted-Therapy” (AAT), will be utilized to refer to any human-animal contact oriented to improving the mental health or behavior of prisoners regardless of the type of program. This term will also be used interchangeably with animal-assisted interventions and animal-assisted activities. Although, AAT is more focused on therapeutic and direct approaches, AAA and AAI are more subtle or indirect.

It is important for prisoners to attain some sort of rehabilitation; using animals is a strategic method that results in threefold outcomes. The bond between humans and animals are very complex, but unique compared with other animals. Dogs particularly have been the primary kind of animal that has been used in prison programs to help inmates serve their sentence and reduce violence within prisons. Having programs that use animals teaches prisoners to be compassionate, patient, less violent, and provides them with new skills that can later be used when they are released from prison. Providing such programs can be the difference between reducing or increasing the number of people that return to prison. If inmates do not receive some type of rehabilitation, they tend to lack the motivation to change their behavior. Therefore, programs such as AAT can aid prisoners by motivating them to behave better so that they will not return to prison. In the broader view, this is an important issue given that reducing crime and prison populations are the ultimate goals for many states especially California.

Research in the field of animal-assisted therapy, particularly in the prison setting is still fairly new. For this reason, there have not been many systematic studies done examining the effects that animals can have on prisoners.

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However, many anecdotal and preliminary studies provide firsthand information and evidence about the benefits of animal-assisted activities in prisons. Most of the few scholars that have chosen to write about this subject have stated that pet therapy has had some sort of positive effect on prisoners. Strimple (2003) argues that prisons that use animal-assisted therapy can reduce recidivism and provides inmates with life-enhancing skills. Similarly, other scholars such as Britton and Button (2005) agree that when in AAT programs, prisoners learn life skills such as responsibility and patience that ultimately help them become good community members. Notwithstanding the anecdotal and preliminary evidence, an argument that could be made against AAI is that not everyone may be so fond of animals. Some people may even be afraid of animals or have a history of violence and abuse, which in turn can prevent the progress of prisoners and the safety of animals. However, a solution to this potential problem is to simply select prisoners that want to be part of this rehabilitation program. This will allow therapists to ask permission before exposing an individual to animals and help them provide this program to those that desire it. Additionally, the staff should be required to teach all inmates involved in these programs how to properly care for different types of animals. This will ensure the safety of the animals while improving the chances of success with the programs.

### **The Purpose of Rehabilitation: A Focus on Animal-Assisted Interventions**

Rehabilitation for prisoners of any sort is generally regarded as unnecessary and as a lenient form of dealing with inmates; however, most people fail to realize its benefit and its necessary use when it comes to mental health or disadvantaged individuals. Often, the reason that people end up in prison is

because of the constant distress that disadvantage has caused in their lives. Poverty alone can trigger multiple ripples of effects in a person's life. This is not to say that poverty or its effects always attribute to the definite occurrence of crime and mental health but there is a correlation. The number of inmates that suffer from some sort of mental illness is largely underestimated. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2005 more than half of all prison and jail inmates have a mental health problem (Jasperson, 2010). This demonstrates that the mentally ill population is larger in a prison context than in a community context. Today the percentage of prisoners that suffer from some sort of mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and schizophrenia is much larger due to, among other factors, a punishment-oriented society. This shows that a larger portion of the mentally ill population is imprisoned instead of receiving the help they require. The repercussions of this include but are not limited to the failure of providing convicts with proper and adequate services and the means to improve. Only about 36% of incarcerated offenders receive treatment while in prison (Fournier, Geller, & Fortney, 2007). This is the result of a larger societal problem in which people favor punishing anyone that makes a mistake and thus, overlook the larger context of the problem when they should instead strive to help those individuals transform into better people by identifying the roots of their psychological problems. This norm can be explained through the fallacious hypothetical syllogism in which it is believed that A leads to B leads to C—that is, if people make mistakes, they must be punished and therefore, they will learn their lesson. In part, this is logical; however, punishment alone is not always the answer. For this reason, using only punishment to

prevent people from committing criminal acts can cause more harm than good to individuals and society in the long run.

Moreover, combining rehabilitation with punishment can have a higher probability of success in improving the behavior of inmates because it is oriented to account for the emotional needs of individuals. It has been proven that punishment alone is not as effective in changing the behaviors of prisoners or anyone in general as opposed to when provided with some form of rehabilitation. A reason for which incarceration is not sufficient is because in order to transform individuals, correctional education must “consider the whole person inside the uniform that comes with human needs, emotions, and attitudes” (Deaton, 2005, p. 47). In other words, rehabilitation is necessary in order to transform a person because it focuses on the emotional aspect of humans as opposed to only punishment. For this reason, rehabilitation should be part of all correctional facilities. Another point to take into consideration is that rehabilitation and therapy can be beneficial to all prisoners regardless if they suffer from mental problems or not. The benefits of rehabilitation programs are numerous and include: acquiring skills, learning responsibility, increasing hope and motivation, increasing social skills and cooperation, reducing mental health effects, reducing stress and anxiety, and reducing recidivism (Fine, 2006; Deaton, 2005; Strimple, 2003; Wilson & Turner, 1998). This shows that rehabilitation is necessary because it helps prisoners become better members of society by providing them with the tools to do so. It is clear that implementing rehabilitation programs in prisons can have positive effects for offenders. Many correctional facilities around the world have realized these benefits which is why many of them have begun to integrate rehabilitation programs in their institutions.



A new type of rehabilitation program that has been increasing in the prison setting is that of animal-assisted interventions. These programs can range from work, transitional, and therapeutic programs or a combination of them with the use of animals. This type of therapy is fairly new in many aspects of society but is specifically new to that of the prison institutions. There are multiple benefits that animals-assisted activities could bring to inmates. One type of AAI program, involves inmates working to train animals which in turn teaches them how to manage responsibility. For example, a prisoner from a Virginia correctional facility claimed that taking care of a dog 24 hours seven days a week helped him learn to care for someone other than himself and that this made him responsible because he didn't want anything bad to happen to the dog (Ensminger, 2010). Inmates are also taught vocational skills that in many cases lead to job opportunities after they are released. Many of the programs lead inmates to qualify to receive vocational certificates such as pet care technician certificates, dog handling certificates, and even veterinary assistant certificates (Ensminger, 2010). As Strimple claimed, in 2003 a hundred percent of the inmates that were participating in these programs were finding jobs and were not reoffending citizens (2003). Apart from working with the animals, there are also programs that allow therapists to use animals as a means of their therapy process in the prisons. This is a more direct approach because the animals are used for therapeutic purposes; however, the training and work programs also have similar effects on prisoners. This is because while the inmates are spending time with these animals they are unconsciously receiving therapeutic benefits.

Additionally, animal-assisted interventions in the prison setting has three main branches in the methods they are

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employed. The most typical activities that inmates participate in are programs which require prisoners to train animals for adoption. These animals are taken from local animal shelters and provided with obedience training so that they have a better chance of getting adopted (Britton & Button, 2005). There are also programs in which the animals are trained to become assistance animals. They learn specific tasks so that they can serve individuals with certain disabilities or health issues such as children with anxiety or veterans with PTSD. This is beneficial to animals and inmates because the prisoners feel like they are helping the community by training dogs to become service animals and thus, preventing them from becoming euthanized (Deaton, 2005). Additionally, some prisons implement programs that allow animals to be used for therapeutic purposes; however, this is not as common as the other types of programs. When this form of AAT is used, a trained human-animal team in collaboration with a professional staff member works with inmates toward specific rehabilitative goals (Fine, 2006). Programs like these allow prisoners or any patient to be more open with therapists than those without animals. For this reason, using animals with therapy can also be helpful in treating inmates with mental health problems.

Just as there are various forms of animal-assisted intervention programs in correctional facilities, the type of animals used for rehabilitative purposes can also vary depending on the prison. The most common animals used are dogs, cats, horses, and birds; dogs being the most common of all due to their accessibility. The use of horses in animal-assisted activities however, have also been common in many of these programs. The Wild Mustang Program in New Mexico is one of many programs that used horses as a rehabilitative method for inmates.

The horses were tamed and trained to prevent their starvation in the wild (Cushing, Williams, & Kronick, 1995). The contact with the horses allowed inmates to feel like they were doing meaningful work. They also took nurturing roles as well as practiced autonomy—all of which led to an increase of responsibility and a decrease in disciplinary infractions. Other horse programs such as the one established by the New York State Department of Correctional Services focused on rehabilitating retired racehorses that were neglected after perceived to have no economic value. The program prevented these horses from being sold in meat auctions and instead gave them a further purpose

(Deaton, 2005). Inmates were responsible of nursing the horses back to physical and emotional health, however, this process was also rehabilitating the prisoners.

For the past few years, the benefits of animal-assisted therapy have allowed this form of rehabilitation to gain momentum in penal institutions. The first credited inmate-animal therapy program was that of Ohio's Oakwood Forensic Center in 1975 (Fine, 2006). This program was implemented as the result of inmates secretly cooperating and communicating to help an injured bird found in the prison yard. Upon realizing this, a psychiatric social worker initiated this program in hope of further improving the behavior of inmates (Strimple, 2003). Studies were further conducted from this program and concluded that violence and suicide rates had decreased within the year that the program was started (Strimple, 2003). Similar programs were then established in other correctional facilities. In 1982, for example, a program that allowed inmates to care for injured stray cats was established in the Lorton prison in Virginia. This program permitted inmates who were perceived as "hardened

criminals” to become more compassionate to other living things (Altschiller, 2011). “I eat breakfast,” said one inmate who participated in this program, “the cats get my lunch, and we share my dinner” (Altschiller, 2011, p.31). This shows that these programs can become quite essential in changing the behavior of prisoners. Prison authorities were impressed with the results of this program and claimed that the prisoners’ behavior changed for the better. They became less antisocial while their self-worth increased and this gave hope to many prisoners for their futures. Since then, there have been other programs established in the United States. It is reported that there were at least 20 states and 1 federal penitentiary that offered programs like this (Currie, 2008). Although the benefits have not been scientifically proven, the direct effects that these programs have had on prisoners demonstrate their values to the prison institutions.

The human-animal interactions that are involved in animal-assisted therapy can benefit both animals and humans because of the psychological, physiological, sociological effects. Psychologically, animals improve the mood of prisoners. Animals tend to make inmates happier and motivate them to behave better. According to Britton and Button’s research (2005), there was an inmate by the name Jackson, who was simply “filled with grievances and had huge anger and emotional problems,” he was given a dog and became a completely different person (p. 90). Jackson now leads the class and teaches other inmates how to become dog handlers, claiming that the dog gave him something to look forward to as well as made him less selfish. Animals also make prisoners less anxious. This is because animals tend to help humans deal with anger and teach them how to be more patient. Animals provide humans with a feeling of unconditional love and this can make the loneliest of

people feel like they are not alone (Wilson & Turner, 1998). Similarly, animals can make prisoners feel less lonely and more comfortable because they know that they are nonjudgmental. Many prisoners feel like they are viewed as disappointments of society and so interacting with a living creature that is not judgmental has greater impacts on humans than we realize. Physiologically, animals help reduce the stress and blood pressure of prisoners which results in less violence and more cooperation amongst prisoners given that they become calmer. This may be another reason for the reduction in aggressive incidents in prison populations. Ensminger (2009), an attorney and skilled dog advocate, claimed:

In one prison, there were 68 aggressive incidents in the four months before a puppy program was instituted, 12 of which resulted in physical altercations. In the four months after the programs began, there were only 39 aggressive incidents reported six of which became physical (p. 221).

This demonstrates that animals in correctional facilities can reduce the aggressive behavior of inmates significantly. The prison was able to reduce the number of aggressive incidents nearly by half of what it was prior to the use of animal interventions thus, showing the benefits of these programs. Sociologically, animals allow for prisoners to become more compassionate, social among other inmates and guards, and become friendlier. An inmate from the Lorton Correctional Facility stated that he was able to make friends with a man who was seen as a tough gang member. He mentioned that during the program he became sweet and gentle because the animals had made him more compassionate and understanding (Ensminger,

2010). Many of these programs have also demonstrated that having animals around the prison allowed for staff and inmates to get along better. Prisoners learned to lose fear and trust the staff which led to improvements in their behavior. This shows that animals can be a good way to rehabilitate prisoners. Not only does animal-assisted interventions result in less institutional infractions, but they improve prisoners' mental health and increase social sensitivity. They also learn new skills that allow for the transition process from prison to society easier because they are more marketable for jobs.

### **The Effectiveness of Animal-Assisted Interventions within Different Prison Populations**

All the preliminary research on AAT programs that has been done so far have shown positive results and effects for prisoners. However, to further research what methods, populations, and variables work best we must compare different examples of successful programs. The location, gender, age, and type of animal used in these programs can all be different factors that either inhibit or facilitate the results of the programs. The first example is an anecdotal description of the results of a three-week training program of a juvenile correctional facility in New Mexico. Four to five shelter dogs that were at risk for being put to sleep were transferred to this youth facility where they would be trained for obedience skills with the use of positive reinforcements—something that many of these teens were not familiar with. The purpose of the program was to indirectly demonstrate to the teenagers that they too can be given a second chance if they were willing to change their behaviors (Harbolt & Ward, 2001). The participants had been incarcerated for a variety of reasons, some of which included dog fighting. Thus, it is interesting to see the results and impact the program had on these

individuals. At the end of the program, the participants were asked to write letters to the potential adopters of the dog they had trained. The most salient and surprising transformation was that of a young man who was involved in dog fighting prior to his incarceration. This individual participated in the program and many times he would lose his temper. Sometimes he had the urge to resort to the negative measures he was used to; however, over time he came to love the dog and even learned quite a few things with his experience with her. When the time came to write his letter, some of the things he stated was surprising. He wrote:

What I like about her is that she is beautiful and playful, but hard headed like me... Please don't tie or cage this dog up cause she does not need to be caged like a wild dog...You will love her because she will love you... She needs a lot of love and praise. (Harbolt & Ward, 2001, p. 181)

What this quote demonstrates is that this young man was willing to completely change his aggressive and violent behavior. He became compassionate to this dog, something that he was unable to do before but with time and the right measures he was able to change for the better.

In the same way that juveniles are able to benefit from animal-assisted interventions, so to can these programs help women in penal institutions. According to Jaspersen (2010), an estimated 73% of females in state prisons, compared to 55% of male inmates, have a mental health problem. This is because many women who end up in prison tend to have previously suffered from some sort of abuse which could lead to depression, trauma, and other mental illnesses. As a result, rehabilitation with the use of animals can be very beneficial to women. An example of animal-assisted activities in female correctional

facilities is that of the Washington State Correctional Center for Women, where inmates train dogs to become service animals for the disabled. The participants of the program had to take and pass a 12-week training course that taught them the essentials of dog and cat care. In total, 75 women participated in the program and the majority claimed that they learned responsibility as well as gained self-esteem and the motivation to change their lives (Deaton, 2005). Apart for these benefits, the recidivism rate of the participants over three years was zero. This is significant because it shows that these programs can be highly effective in improving the behavior of female inmates.

Likewise, male offenders can also benefit from animal-assisted interventions in the prison setting. Although mental health problems are less common in men than in women, there is an overall large percentage of mentally ill individuals in prisons. It is also known that rehabilitation can be beneficial to all prisoners. For this reason, AAT programs have been successful in improving the behavior of men in many correctional facilities. An example of this is the program at the California Correctional Center in Susanville that offered a 90-day horse gentling course. This program allowed prisoners to have a special bond with the horses because they learned to take care of them as well as to trust and respect them. Many of the participants never had the chance to care for another living being to the extent of the horses that they trained and this allowed them to become more empathetic and compassionate individuals. The most rewarding part of the program for many of the inmates was the moment they were praised for all the hard work they had done. One inmate stated:

I know everyone considers us vermin and convicts, and sure, were screwed up...But the



last time they held an adoption, the outside people gave us all a round of applause, and for the first time in a long time we felt like real human beings. (Deaton, 2005, p. 57).

Moreover, this shows the positive effects that animal-assisted activities can have on inmates. If the government is willing to offer prisoners second chances by providing them with rehabilitation programs, it is possible that incarceration rates will decrease.

Overall, despite the different variables and the only constants being prisoners and animal rehabilitative programs, animal-assisted therapy has shown to benefit a variety of offenders. Regardless of the state, gender and age of the prisoner, or the type of animal used in the programs, all programs indicated positive results. In spite of the fact that only anecdotal evidence is provided, the effects that these rehabilitative programs have had on individuals is quite significant and in some cases life changing. Therefore, it is important to take in consideration the rehabilitation of prisoners, particularly in states that suffer from mass incarceration rates such as California. However, because each population has different needs AAT may vary in order to achieve their specific and unique goals.

**The Indirect Benefits of Animal-Assisted Interventions:  
A “Win-Win-Win Situation”**

After examining the effects and benefits of animal-assisted interventions with prisoners, we must also consider the benefits that these programs can have on third parties such as that of the animals, adopters, and the community. Furthermore, the benefits that these programs provide for the animals are quite meaningful as well. Just like the inmates, the programs offer the

animals a second chance in life. Many of the animals that are used in these programs are animals that have low chances of being adopted. Thus, taking these animals and training them increases their chances of getting adopted. What this means is that there will be less animals at risk of being euthanized. Coincidentally, this will also mean that far more dogs and cats will have homes and a purpose instead of living on the streets.

In addition, many of the animal-assisted programs focus on training assistance animals causing positive spillover effects for the community and individuals. First, allowing inmates to train animals provides a higher success than that of regular volunteers. The reason for this is because prisoners can dedicate more time to the animals. For example, Ensminger (2010) claims that “eighty-seven percent of dogs trained by prisoners in New York...were able to move on to more rigorous training, compared with only fifty percent of those trained by volunteers outside the prison walls” (p. 221). Effective training is not the only benefit of prison trained animals. According to Strimple (2003), training animals in correctional facilities is more cost effective: “the normal expense of training a service dog may run from \$10,000 to \$12,000 as opposed to \$4,000” (p. 74). By training service dogs at a lower cost, it will allow for more disabled individuals to own an animal of their own. There are many people who suffer from different health, physical, or emotional issues and having an assistance dog can completely change their lives. Essentially, animal-assisted therapy is “good for the dogs, [who are] often adopted from shelters were they’d otherwise be killed. It’s good for the disabled, who experience a new world of freedom with the dogs at their side. And it can forever change the lives of inmates” (Deaton, 2005, p. 53). There are also further implicit benefits from AAT that extend to the community

and state. This is shown by firsthand evidence that has been examined by scholars who seem to believe that these programs correlate to lower levels of recidivism (Britton & Button, 2005; Deaton, 2005; Strimple, 2003). Moreover, if less convicts are returning to prison then we can safely say that incarceration rates will decrease as well as the costs for operating and maintaining prisons, all of which benefit the state. Another point to consider is that by rehabilitating prisoners, they will become better community members and thus, be able to reintegrate in society. This would ultimately benefit the community given that successfully rehabilitated individuals will call for less crime rates.

To conclude, the paper has provided evidence as to why rehabilitation, more specifically animal-assisted therapy in penal institutions is beneficial to inmates. Not only does AAI programs provide offenders with psychological, physiological, and sociological benefits but teaches them life-enhancing skills that allow individuals to successfully incorporate into society. Examples of animal-assisted activities among different populations such as males, females, and juveniles were also analyzed and provided positive results for the effectiveness of the programs. Equally important are the benefits that AAI programs provide to third parties such as individuals with disabilities who adopt the service animals as well as the animals and society. In short, we can conclude that animal-assisted therapy is a beneficial form of rehabilitation that benefits prisoners, animals, and society. Thus, it is important to consider implementing these types of rehabilitation programs in all correctional facilities.

As a developing field, animal-assisted therapy programs must further be studied. Currently, there are multiple preliminary

research studies on this subject; however, without systematic research that provides measurable data, it is hard to increase general support for this form of rehabilitation. Thus, it is imperative to further research the effectiveness of these programs in order to add validity to this field. This will open the doors for certain fields such as justice studies and psychology to improve and establish more effective ways of dealing with prisoners. Further research questions that could come up is whether the benefits of these programs are long-term or if there is a gender difference in how male and females respond to the programs. Additionally, there is bound to be public resistance of these programs given that many people believe that prisoners should not be treated with such leniency. Therefore, people must learn to think about the situational factors that lead many of these individuals to end up in prisons. By doing so, they will realize that rehabilitation in penal institutions is crucial for the transformation of an individual. State and federal government should fund these programs in hope of reducing crime and incarceration rates given that the U.S. has one of the highest percentages of prison populations.

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