

Prison Dog Programs:

A Literature Review from and Anthrozoological Perspective

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### Abstract

Despite their wide implementation in the United States, there has been very little substantive research done on prison dog programs (PDPs). Many of the existent studies suffer from inherent flaws in scope and methodology, but do consistently demonstrate that the programs aid participating inmates in developing and improving communications and social skills resulting from interactions with the dogs in their care. The available studies also indicate that participants show improvement in personal qualities such as empathy, self-esteem and a sense of responsibility. These benefits are apparently related to a lower rate of recidivism for prison inmates who are directly involved in PDPs. The effectiveness of prison based programs in training and socializing dogs is not well documented, although service animal organizations report much higher than normal acceptance rates from prison programs. Recommendations are provided for further research that might serve to identify best practices and training approaches for both inmates and dogs.

### Prison Dog Programs: A Literature Review from an Anthrozoological Perspective

The first prison-based dog training program was begun in 1981 by Kathleen Quinn (later Sister Pauline Quinn) at the Washington State Correction Center for Women (Strimple, 2003). Based on her personal experience with homelessness, institutionalization and abuse; and in cooperation with Dr. Leo Bustad of Washington State University, she developed the Prison Pet Partnership Program, in which prison inmates train service dogs for disabled persons to benefit the community and instill in them self-confidence and self-esteem (Stripling, 1998). Since then, similar programs have been implemented throughout the United States as well as several other countries. A 2016 survey found that dog training programs have been established in more than 290 correctional facilities in all 50 states (Cooke and Farrington 2016), intended to socialize and train dogs for placement with adoptive families or as service dogs. In general, PDPs are implemented in partnership with large animal shelters and service dog training programs which provide veterinary care, dog food, training aids and care items (e.g. crates, toys, grooming tools), and volunteer trainers for the inmate participants. The inmate trainers are supervised by volunteers on a regular basis, who also provide feedback and evaluations. The dogs are housed in the corrections facilities, either with the prisoners or in kennels.

These programs have become increasingly popular, due in part to media attention as exemplified by the Animal Planet network's 2004 "Cell Dogs" documentary (Deaton, 2005). Additional documentaries have been made since then, featuring programs in several different correctional facilities. The media coverage has doubtlessly contributed to the rapid implementation of prison dog programs (PDP), as it provides correctional institutions with a positive public image, at very little expense or inconvenience. This coverage features very

appealing images of hardened prisoners working with puppies and “problem dogs”, and turning them into service dogs and adoptable pets. In addition, several claims are being made about the benefits of PDPs, such as providing convicts with useful training and job placement skills, improving moral and reducing violence in institutions that have such programs, performing a therapeutic function for the prisoners that take part in them and being highly effective in training dogs for placement and service. However, and perhaps surprisingly, there has been very little substantive work done to test these claims. Further there is very little research into the best practices for implementing such programs.

This paper will be an attempt to examine the existing studies and literature from the perspective of anthrozoology and determine whether the claims made about the PDPs have been substantiated. This will require some careful interpretation, as the work done thus far has primarily been in the fields of criminology and psychology. It will also require sifting of qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as blends of those two methods, along with media accounts of the prison dog projects. It should be noted that this study is limited to dog training programs, and does not address animal-assisted therapy programs which have also been implemented in several correctional facilities.

The PDPs are said to provide many benefits; among them are an improvement in overall prison moral and a reduction in violence, post-incarceration benefits for prisoners involved in the program which include marketable job skills and an overall reduction in recidivism, and psychosocial benefits for the inmate dog trainers. In addition, the programs are said to provide highly effective training and socialization for the dogs, in terms of socializing and training shelter dogs, raising puppies for service dog programs and in training service dogs. This paper will concentrate on these specific claims and attempt to assess their validity. Four hypotheses

will be tested, based on the conventional wisdom and popular assumptions surrounding PDPs. Each of them was developed to determine the impact that prisoner trainers and dogs have on each other, and the impact of the dogs' presence in the overall prison environment.

## **Method**

### **Nature of the study**

This study is a literature review of available materials on PDPs, including academic research, studies published in scientific or trade journals, print media and broadcast documentaries. It should be noted that the available studies were done primarily to assess the impact of PDPs on prison systems overall, or on the effect that participation in the program had on individual inmates, rather than focusing on the interaction between the dogs and human inmates.

Several hypotheses will be posed, based on the claims made regarding PDPs. These are:

1. PDPs have an overall beneficial effect on prisons in which they are implemented, resulting in an overall improvement in moral and a reduction of infractions and violence.
2. PDPs have post-incarceration benefits for participating inmates, including the development of marketable skills that lead to employment and an overall reduction in recidivism.
3. PDPs aid participating inmates in the development of social skills, improve communications and self-control.
4. PDPs are highly effective in training dogs for adoption and for careers as service dogs.

The validity of these hypotheses will be tested by determining if the available information supports them. Given the variety of data sources, consideration will be given to both quantitative and qualitative research, as well as supported media accounts.

**Quantitative Studies.** Quantified data will be used whenever possible to determine the above hypotheses. Recognizing that these studies may not have been intended to address these specific issues, and were not intended to be Anthrozoological inquiries, they will be treated as secondary research.

**Qualitative studies.** These studies will be evaluated in terms of how they tend to support, disprove or are inconclusive regarding the four hypotheses developed for this paper. Weight will be given to each study in terms of the sample size and an evaluation of whether the evidence cited adequately supports the conclusions drawn by the authors.

### **Secondary sources.**

Given the amount of media attention paid to PDPs and the impact that this material has had on the spread of these programs and the expected results from them, it is reasonable to examine this material in context with the above mentioned formal studies. This review will maintain a healthy skepticism about the media accounts, considering that they are made with no rigor or presumption of impartiality. However, there is potential value in their use to illustrate assumptions and expectations, and in providing anecdotal evidence concerning PDP's effectiveness.

## **Results**

As stated above, the above hypotheses were evaluated by means of reviewing the available literature. The results these reviews are as follows:

**Outcome 1**

The hypothesis that PDPs have an overall beneficial effect on prison environments, resulting in improved prisoner moral and a reduction of violence, is supported by anecdotal accounts. Surveys of prison staff in institutions with PDPs have reported that the overall prison environment becomes more positive, stress levels are reduced (Davis, 2011) and that moral generally improves (Cooke and Farrington, 2014). In their 2005 study, Britton and Button discussed the positive reception of dogs among both prisoners and staff, to the point that there was some concern that prisoners not involved in the program would become overly protective of the dogs and interfere if handlers were observed correcting dog's behavior. This theme of improved moral among inmates and staff is continued in trade journals (Harkrader, Burke and Owen, 2004; Turner, 2007) and print media (Barron, 2015).

However, these impressions are primarily based on anecdotes and open-ended interviews with persons actively involved in the PDPs. In a 2016 quantitative review of disciplinary problems, there was no difference found between prisons that have PDPs and those without (Brown, Frissora, Wardle and Onwudiwe, 2015). In their 2007 study of human-dog interaction in the Virginia prison system, Fournier, Geller and Voorhies were unable to draw any substantive conclusions of what affect the dogs were having on the general prison population. It should be noted that the use of secondary research has severe limitations. The data collection was subject to varying degrees of rigor, and the definitions, such as "disciplinary issues" is not standardized or guaranteed to accurately reflect the overall environment in a particular section of a prison.

**Outcome 2**

The hypothesis regarding the post-incarceration benefits of PDP's is cited as a positive feature in several publications. There are repeated mentions of former felons finding

employment in dog-related commercial activities, and a number of citations of reduced rates of recidivism for inmates participating in the PDPs.

The employment stories are largely anecdotal, in which authors cite some examples of an individual felon finding such employment (Harkrader, Burke and Owen, 2004, Schniper 2010). A number of other sources cite PDPs as being an effective vocational program in which felons receive training as dog handlers, trainers or kennel technicians, all of which have the potential to create post incarceration opportunities for employment (Furst, 2006). However, as Furst points out, these studies do not provide follow-on investigation of released inmates to determine whether they pursued or obtained employment in these fields. It should be noted that very few of the PDPs provide participants with opportunities to earn the professional certifications that are needed for successful employment in as dog handlers or trainers (Larkin, 2017). However, those programs that do include formal education in field such as Animal Laboratory Technician, and actively assist participating inmates in job searches, have a higher rate of job placement (Wheaton, 2013). The Prison Pet Partnership program in the Washington State Correctional Facility for Women, the program originally started by Sister Pauline Quinn, uses industry-related vocational training standards for inmate participants and states that 100 percent of participating inmates are employed following release (Quinn, n/d)

Formal studies in this area generally do not support the anecdotal reports of employment. A 2016 study of the PDPs in the Florida Prison system indicates that participation in these programs had little effect on post-incarceration employment (Hill, 2016), and there is little quantitative data available to support the argument that PDPs aid participants in finding post-incarceration employment. States generally do not track employment information for former

felons for more than a few months post-release, nor are there statistics available on employment related to any vocational programs in which individual felons participated (Hill, 2016).

The issue of recidivism by inmates participating in PDPs is another topic that is widely advertised as a continuing benefit. The conventional wisdom is that the prisoners who engage in dog training are less likely to re-offend after release. This has proven difficult to quantify for several reasons. First, in most cases the inmate participants are undergo careful screening before selection. Violent offenders, prisoners with adverse disciplinary records, and other risk factors are considered in accepting inmates into the programs (Furst, 2006; Larkin, 2007) if for no other reason than to ensure the safety of the animals and volunteer trainers. It can be argued that the factors used in selecting prisoners are also indicators of the risk that an individual will re-offend once released. Secondly, there is no clear definition of recidivism used by researchers. The term has been defined in several studies as meaning post-incarceration arrest, arrest for a major offense, conviction and imprisonment. In addition, there are serious obstacles in tracking recidivism rates at all, simply due to state and local variances in policies, police enforcement, conviction standards, sentencing guidelines and other related factors (Brown, Frissora, Wardle and Onwudiwe, 2015). Lastly, most studies have a very small size, and often suffer from the lack of a suitable control group.

The evidence for a reduced recidivism rate is primarily in the form of testimonials. For example, Strimple (2003) cites one prison superintendent as stating: “Since our dog training program started in 1997, we’ve had 68 inmates released who were involved in the program and not one has reoffended and returned to prison.” This is a clear theme that is also supported in by Sister Quinn’s web site, however these individual accounts are not directly supported by data. In spite of the noted flaws with formal investigation of this issue, the available studies ( Hill, 2016),

do support this anecdotal evidence that participation in a PGP does reduce the incidence of post-incarceration re-arrest and conviction.

### **Outcome 3**

The purported changes in the social skills and outlook of PDP participants is touted as a major benefit of these programs. A number of studies have investigated this claim using various methodologies, including interviews with prisoners and staff, examination of prison discipline records for participants, observation of human-animal interaction in PDPs, blood pressure monitoring of participating prisoners and standardized pre- and post-testing.

The results of these studies vary, in some ways due to differences in methodologies and data sets being examined, for example, examinations into prison misconduct by Hill (2016) and Fournier, Geller and Voorhies (2007) indicated widely different results. As pointed out by Wheaton (2013), the studies of the effects on prisoners are generally flawed, and suffer from such factors as small sample sizes, lack of control groups, selection bias for program participants, differences in methodologies among studies, and a lack of pre- and post-testing in most cases.

However, even in light of flaws in PDP studies, the preponderance of results indicates a clear and consistent theme that prisoners taking part in these studies display improvements in social skills, communications skills, self-control and empathy towards others (Britton and Button, 2005; Currie, 2008; Deaton, 2005; Furst, 2006; Harkrader, Burke and Owen, 2004; Richardson-Taylor and Blanchette, 2001; Strimple, 2003; Turner, 2007). The clear trend of study results, in spite of weaknesses of individual studies and variances in methodologies, is clear evidence that prisoners are directly benefitting from direct interaction with the non-human animals in these programs.

**Outcome 4**

The quality of dog training in PDPs is documented to varying degrees by the organizations that receive the dogs following “graduation”. The National Education for Assistance Dog Services (NEADS) reports that they receive 90 to 95 percent of their dogs from 7 correctional facilities. NEADS advises that their Prison PUP Partnership program provides faster and more consistent training for service dogs than conventional volunteers (“Prison PUP Partnership”, n/d). The Puppies Behind Bars program in New York reports that 87 percent of puppies raised by inmates are accepted for advanced service dog training, as opposed to a 50 percent acceptance rate for puppies raised by civilian volunteers (Harkrader, Burke and Owen, 2014).

The success rate of PDPs in training and socializing dogs for adoption is less well documented. Studies conducted by Mulcahey and McLaughlin (2013) and Britton and Button (2005) made particular note that PDPs did not collect data on successfully adopted dogs once they are released to shelters, and the receiving organizations generally did not specifically identify prison dogs in adoption statistics. One quantitative study of a PGP at a Canadian Women’s correctional facility did follow up on dogs after release for adoption, and reported that of 17 dogs released for adoption at the time of the study, 14 were successfully placed and three were euthanized (Richardson-Taylor and Blanchette, 2001). One additional benefit of prison-trained dogs is financial: The cost of inmate trainers is a small fraction of the salaries of professional dog trainers, who would be spending less time with each individual dog (Massachusetts Department of Correction, 2012).

### **Discussion**

The review of current literature has shown that the dog training programs have clear benefits of involved prisoners in two related areas: the improvement in self-image and interpersonal skills, and the reduction in rates of recidivism. The evidence also indicates that the prison dog programs are highly effective in training and socializing dogs for adoption or for careers as service dogs. This third finding is also potentially related to the success in the psychosocial benefits to prisoners, as discussed below.

It was observed in several studies that the PDPs differ from many prison programs in one critical respect: Their primary purpose is not to be therapeutic to the prisoners, but to provide a service to the community outside the prison walls. This is a key distinction, as it indicates that any benefits to the prisoner participants are self-generated, not the result of any instruction or therapy programs. The most significant impacts are in prisoners' self-images, social identity and social skills. These things cannot be taught; individuals must incorporate these qualities through interactions with others.

### **Problems and Barriers**

Assessing the effectiveness and possible benefits of the prison dog programs is severely hampered by several factors.

**Study Flaws.** As noted in recent comprehensive literature reviews (Larkin 2017; Massachusetts Department of Correction, 2012; Wheaton, 2013), there are recurring flaws in the research conducted to date. First, much of the data is in the form of anecdotal accounts, or qualitative studies based on open-ended questionnaires. In addition, some of the quantitative studies consist of secondary research using data previously collected by state agencies for other purposes, which limits the utility of the data and calls into question the rigor with which the

information was collected and compiled. In almost all cases, there was no normalization of data; for example, in various studies, recidivism was defined as arrest, conviction or re-incarceration. Several studies also suffer from extremely small test populations, flawed methodology and lack of control groups. Many studies involved only one program in one corrections facility, which casts doubt on any generalized conclusions (Cooke and Farrington, 2016). In most cases there are issues with the selection process for program participants. The prisoners taking part in these programs are volunteers, and selected based on their criminal and prison records. Felons with histories of violence or abuse of minors and family members are generally screened out, and participants who indicate a favorable view of animals are favored. This selection process has the potential to skew results by involving only high-performing study participants. In addition, the use of volunteers instead of a more randomized selection of participants creates a potential for motivated thinking on the part of program participants as well as the prison staff members who select and observe these individuals.

**Perspective issues.** In addition to the flaws in study designs and implementation, there is one continuing issue that presents itself from an Anthrozoological perspective. A review of the literature reveals a clear theme in which the presence of the dogs is treated simply as a study variable, without real consideration as to the nature of the relationship between the prisoner subjects and the dog subjects (Strimple, 2003). Little actual attention is paid to whether the prisoners are paired with puppies that are bred, temperament tested and selected as service dogs, dogs that are selected from high-kill animal shelters, dogs from shelters with behavioral or temperament issues, or dogs that are purposely selected from shelters as promising candidates to become service animals. The relationship between a trainer and dog in a vocationally-oriented program to train service dogs would be substantially different than that of a trainer engaged in

rehabilitating a dog from a shelter environment. Factors such as the dog's living arrangements, length of stay in prisons, training methods and other factors that would weigh into the daily interactions between prisoners and dogs are also given very little consideration as study factors.

**Programmatic Differences.** Not surprisingly, since the studies done to date have been from the perspective of criminology, psychology and sociology, the focus has been on the PDPs impact on human participants. However, each program is essentially “home-grown” in cooperation with a local animal welfare organization and they vary widely in terms of implementation, policies and training methods (Mulcahy and McLaughlin, 2013). Since the stated objectives of PDPs is to aid external communities by means of training dogs for placement or as service animals, this is a clear shortcoming. PDPs vary widely in terms of implementation; for example, the NEADS program is unique in that it incorporates weekend “furloughs” for the puppies being trained as service dogs, in which the puppies are placed with volunteer families in order acclimate the puppies to life outside of a prison setting.

### **Study Findings**

A review of the literature on PDPs shows a clear and consistent theme that the prisoner participants undergo changes in their emotional and social state through involvement in these programs. These changes are described as increased self-control, improved self-image, sense of responsibility, improved communications skills, increased empathy, improved social skills and other such sociological or psychological constructs. There are several theories as to the reason for these changes.

**Attachment theory.** In her 2015 dissertation, Sue Weaver cites many studies that found a linkage between criminal behavior and the lack of a secure attachment to family and friends during childhood. The absence of a strong, secure attachment results in poor social development

skills, lack of empathy and the development of a social conscience. Her research supported the theory that a lack of a secure attachment to others is a risk factor in creating social bonds and acceptance of social norms.

Weaver provides multiple references indicating that “Human-Animal Interaction” provides the prerequisites for forming strong interpersonal attachments, which is lacking among the majority of incarcerated felons. The controlled environment of a prison, and structured approach to the PDPs provides an environment in which damaged attachment bonds can be repaired. In addition, the necessity of learning to communicate with a dog has the effect of teaching felons to develop the interpersonal communications skills that are an essential building block of social interaction. These skills are also learned as the inmate participants must learn to positively interact and cooperate with each other in order to succeed as individuals and as a program. As Weaver states in her conclusion “Dogs can serve as surrogate attachment figures as the inmate learns to trust, bond, receive, and give unconditional love. Over time, these attachment bonds extended to fellow inmate trainers and to the New Leash on Life staff, laying the foundation upon which social skills were built.”

**Symbolic Communication.** Gennifer Furst (2007) explores the possibility that inmates assign the animals with which they are working a human-like identity, and the relationship with this quasi-person provides a mechanism by which the inmates modify their own self-image and social identity. She builds from Maruna’s concept of criminal desistance, in which prisoners who engage in a “recovery story” come to see themselves as different persons.

Furst’s concept is that inmates see themselves in the role of criminal, and the related role of convict, and establish their self-identity based on that role. This self-image is reinforced during daily contact with other prisoners and staff, who view them in that context. This sense of

self-identity is so strong that the prisoners feel that they have no choice but to engage in anti-social behavior, and that desisting from criminal activity requires a “fundamental and intentional shift in a person’s sense of self” (Furst, 2007). Furst argues that the engagement in an altruistic activity with the dog as a quasi-human partner provides a mechanism for bringing about that shift.

Furst cites examples of prisoners learning to control their own emotions and behavior in order to successfully interact with the dogs. The prisoners learned to control their impulses and think about the reasons for their dog’s behavior and actions. The prisoners described the dogs as providing emotional support, and received positive feedback in the form of the skills learned by the dogs as well as unconditional affection. The result is that the both the dogs and human trainers underwent socialization as part of the PDP. The trainers also saw themselves as working for an altruistic goal, without tangible reward, which contributed to their self-identities.

Most importantly, the participating prisoners reported that their social roles changed with regard to other prisoners and staff. Participants increased their interactions with each other, and gained a self-identity as trainers. As other prisoners and staff observed them interacting with the dogs, their perceptions of the participants changed – which was reflected in their interactions and feedback to the participants. In short, not only did the prisoners come to have a changed self-image, their social identities changed as well.

**Socialization.** Fournier (20016) describes the process of “prisonization” in which incarcerated men and women take on social identities and cultural mores as an effect of being incarcerated. This is expressed as exaggerated behaviors of dominance, violence and competition, while suppressing healthy emotional expression, which Fournier describes in male prisons as a “toxic masculinity”. This prisonization phenomenon is enhanced by the fact that

incarceration effectively severs any personal relationships and support mechanisms that felons had in the outside world. This social identity becomes so ingrained that it continues following release, and contributes to the high rate of recidivism.

Fournier reports that participating inmates felt a connection with shelter dogs, which had been “locked up” and often came from abusive backgrounds. The inmate participants were able to express emotions with the dogs, an outlet that had previously been denied to them. They also had to work cooperatively with each other and with prison staff, rather than conforming to the “us versus them” prison mores. Fournier found that the PDPs served to break the cycle of prisonization, by providing prisoners with a quasi-familial relationship with the dogs, and by changing their roles and interactions with each other and with staff personnel.

**Success creates success.** It was noted that the studies that cited psychosocial benefits of PDPs uniformly failed to account for the affect that success would have on participating inmates. The studies did not allow for the changes in self-image that would result from participants receiving a recognized industry or academic certification, having their dogs pass a Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test, having their dog complete service dog training or be accepted into a service dog program, or simply seeing their dog adopted by a family. Success breeds success and increases self-confidence; prisoners that can point to concrete evidence that they have learned new skills and achieved positive results will be changed somewhat in the ways they see themselves and in their value system.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

While the beneficial effects that PDPs have on the overall environment of a correctional facility is unproven, and there is insufficient evidence to conclude that they affect post-incarceration employment of prisoner trainers; there is clear and consistent evidence that

participation in these programs does have positive effects on inmates in the form of improved communications, emotional expression and social skills, and improves their abilities to feel and express of empathy, self-control and personal responsibility. This, in turn, results in participants having appreciably reduced risks of re-offending and re-imprisonment. Further, there are strong indications that PDPs are very effective in training and socializing service animals.

Over the past two decades, the United States has changed its philosophy regarding imprisonment of convicted criminals for having an emphasis on reform and rehabilitation to one of punishing offenders and protecting the public from the criminal element (Fournier, Geller and Voorhies, 2007; Larkin, 2017). Indeed, the current methods and legal practices at the state and federal level, such as determinate sentencing, could bring into question whether we can accurately continue to label prisons as “correctional facilities”. Not coincidentally, the number of incarcerated persons has increased almost exponentially, as have the rates of recidivism for released and paroled prisoners (Wheaton, 2013).

If the goal of our prison system is, in fact, to turn convicted felons from their past behavior and help them become law-abiding citizens, then our prison system should attempt to help prisoners in changing their mindsets and self-images from that of criminals, and creating an environment in which they can succeed in normalizing their behavior. In the case of PDPs, if their role is to train service dogs or rehabilitate and place shelter dogs into adoptive homes, then these programs should attempt to use the most effective methods of training and socializing dogs.

A future study should be performed in which selected participants are administered standardized psychological battery tests before and after participation in a PDP, across multiple correctional facilities and programs. The pre- and post-participation results will help identify

which programs are more successful in assisting prisoner trainers in improving their self-image, social skills and social identities, while helping to overcome the inherent lack of randomized participants or control groups. Based on available research, the self-taught changes in self-image and social skills will result in further reducing the recidivism rate for inmate participants.

The study should also incorporate measures of how effective each program is in training dogs. This could be done by tracking raw numbers of dogs that are successfully trained as service animals, puppies that are accepted into service dog advanced training, or by having the animal welfare groups administer standardized behavioral and training evaluations such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Safety Assessment for Evaluating Rehoming methodology and the American Kennel Club's CGC evaluations. The results will enable the development of a recommended implementation and best practices document.

Lastly, based on the documented success of the Prison PUP Partnership (Quinn, n/d; Prison PUP Partnership, n/d), it is recommended that PDPs incorporate a means of enabling participants to earn educational credits and professional technical certifications in animal related fields, and provide assistance in locating post-released employment.

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