

Inmate Perceptions: The Impact of a Prison Animal Training Program

Background

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of jail inmates participating in the Paws and Stripes College program. The Paws and Stripes College program involves incarcerated inmates training local humane shelter canines' obedience training techniques using the canine good citizen model as well as teaching the canines skills in which to participate as comfort/emotional support dogs. Using secondary data from self-report questionnaires completed by the inmates, this study sought to explore how the inmates felt before and after their exposure to the Paws and Stripes College program. Specifically, if the inmates felt that participation in the program was beneficial to them or not, and if so, how.

Keywords: Animal-assisted therapy; Service animals; Prison animal training

1. Introduction

1.1. Text

Prisons and juvenile detention centers across America and globally are implementing animal training programs, in which offenders within the facilities train a wide variety of animals for service positions: to assist the physically challenged persons (i.e., blind, deaf, and mobility impaired); to assist mentally challenged persons (i.e., depressed, anxious, PTSD, and lonely); to assist police forces and the military; to be Canine Good Citizen for families; to be therapy dogs for use in nursing and retirement homes, schools, and counseling; to rehabilitate race horses and wild mustangs; and to use birds and other small animals in therapeutic treatment planning^[1]. Two basic training models are primarily used within the prisons; the “second chance model” and the “training assistance model.” The second chance model pairs shelter dogs with inmates to improve the dogs' chances of being adopted and thus preventing euthanasia and training assistance for service dogs^[2]. These types of programs have shown to be both beneficial for the inmates and the animals, helping to develop empathy and patience^[3]. Pioneer David Lee started the first successful animal therapy program in Lima, Ohio, in 1975, in the United States (U.S.) prison at the Oakwood Forensic Center (formerly the Lima State Hospital for the criminally insane) after he noticed inmates caring for an injured bird. He began a 90-day study comparing patients with pets to patients without pets and the results exceeded expectation: Research showed reduced incidents of violence, decreased use of medications, and reduced number of suicide attempts. The prison trained the first guide dogs and ran a large successful farm^[1].

Dr. Leo Bustard and Kathy Quine (known as Sister Pauline) were two pioneers who laid the foundation for starting over 17 dog training programs in different correctional facilities throughout U.S., and the benefits reported included

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inmates increased self-esteem, increased marketable work skills, and increased earned college credit. In addition, dogs from the local Humane Society were spared euthanasia and trained to be service dogs for people with special needs^[4].

Another exceptional animal program that began in prison involved Dr. Ron Zaidlicz who began a horse training program at the State Penitentiary in Canon City, Colorado, by purchasing three wild mustangs from the Bureau of Land Management. After inmates began training these horses, a study was conducted and the results indicated that inmates assumed a nurturing role by caring for the mustangs, learning how to be gentle and affectionate. Today, a number of correctional facilities have started animal training programs with their inmates to include a facility in Canton, Ohio, where inmates train wild mustangs sold at prison auctions to save horses from injuries and overcrowding.

At the California Correctional Center in Susanville, the correctional facility runs a wild horse gentling program for public adoption. The Wyoming Honor Farm in Riverton began wild horse training in 1989, and the New York State Correctional Services trains low-risk prisoners to care for and retrain retired racehorses making them candidates for adoption. In addition, the Charles Hickley School in Baltimore, Maryland, uses a juvenile detention center to manage a farm on behalf of retired thoroughbred race horses^[1]. Therapy training programs can be seen in many youth correctional facilities across America. Incarcerated youth is paired with dogs from the local shelters that were in danger of being euthanized, thus giving both the dogs and the incarcerated adolescents a second chance at giving back to society^[5].

A wide variety of correctional institutes offer many different animal training programs such as the Washington State Correctional Center for Women which trains service animals for the disabled. The Downeast Correctional Facility in Maine offers training for inmates in animal behavior, grooming, and related vocational classes. The Prison Pups program at Bland Correctional Center in Virginia trains canines to be service dogs, and the Pen Pals program at James River Correctional Center in Virginia saves shelter dogs from euthanasia makes them better candidates for adoption. The Second Chance Prison Canine Program at the Florence Correctional Center in Arizona offers an animal training and boarding service for private owners, which provides a lucrative service for the correctional center. The Branchville Correctional Center in Indiana trains service dogs for physically and mentally challenged children and teens with special needs.

The Project Pooch located at the Oregon Youth Authority's McLaren Correctional facility trains unwanted dogs to be obedient to save them from euthanasia^[4]. Melbourne, Florida, which operates the Paws and Stripes College, rescues shelter dogs and trains them to be adaptable family and/or service dogs for veterans and police. Many of these programs are non-profit and are funded through donations, grants, animal protection groups, and dedicated volunteers who take the dogs on trips outside the prison to get them used to different environments, people, and in many cases working environments performing a service to the individuals and the community.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The researchers utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to gather data. The secondary data involved self-reported questionnaires which were collected by jail staff as an internal formative evaluation of the program and were designed to address research questions about the inmates' perception of their involvement in the Paws and Stripes College program. This subjective approach^[6] allowed the researchers to gain insight into the perceptions' of the participating inmates in the program.

Open-ended questions were completed with nine male and female adult inmates actively engaged in the Paws and Stripes College program. The inmates' responses focused on the benefits and challenges of participating in the Paws and Stripes College program and sought to explore how the inmates felt before and after their exposure to the Paws on Parole program. Specifically, if the inmates felt that participation in the program had helped them or not, and if so, how. The researchers' study received the Institutional Review Board approval from the correctional facility for the project.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before initiating interviews.

2.2. Participant selection

The study explored nine handler questionnaires previously completed by incarcerated adult male and female participants 18 years and older, of all ethnic groups, who have a history of direct human or property violence incarcerated at the

Cocoa, Florida, Brevard County Jail Complex, Paws and Stripes College program. Participants at the time of the study must be incarcerated and actively involved in the Paws and Stripes College program for animal training and willingly volunteered to participate in the study.

The training sessions were performed by a certified dog training professional participating in the program for at least 1 year. The survey was self-administered by the inmates and collected by the jail staff only in an established routine manner that currently exists. No personal identifiers of the inmates were included on the surveys that were collected by the Principal Investigator and coprincipal investigator for data analysis provided by the Brevard County Sheriff's Office, Paws and Stripes College program. The secondary data collected and reviewed will be kept confidentially secured for 7 years in a locked file draw behind a locked office door in the Principle Investigator's Office and will only be accessed by the researchers in the team.

2.3. Data collection

Data were gathered using a researcher-designed questionnaire containing questions focused on the impact of the Paws and Stripes College program on various aspects of inmates' communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal behaviors. The inmates' responses focused on their perceptions about how the Paws and Stripes College program impacts their daily lives inside the jail and their hopes for their lives outside of the jail, and how it impacts the animals being trained. More specifically, the inmates were asked to reveal if they felt that participation in the program had helped them or not, and if so, how.

2.4. Data analysis

All questionnaires were transcribed verbatim. A three-step process^[5] was used to condense the number of categories identified during open coding, by combining categories with similar ideas. Finally, selective coding was used to identify core ideas present in the previously identified themes from the categories. Both the principal and coprincipal researchers participated in the coding process. If researchers did not initially agree on the chosen themes, the coding process was reinitiated by reviewing and discussing common ideas, which were then condensed to more relevant categories that both researchers agreed on.

3. Results

3.1. Main themes

Four broad themes emerged from the data:

a. Inmates benefits

Therapeutic responses: Reduced inmate's stressors of being in jail; increased inmates' patience; and increase inmate's sense of community purpose.

Job skills: Increase potential inmate employability in work with animals and increase inmate's knowledge of animal training skills for personal usage with work in own/family animals.

b. Canine benefits

Taught shelter dogs obedience training making them more adoptable; taught dogs service training skills making them more adoptable; increased adoptions of shelter dogs; and decreased chances for euthanasia.

c. Jail facility benefits

Improves inmates' satisfaction with doing jail time reducing problem behavior; increases the inmates visibility and appreciation by the community; increases positive communication between jail staff and inmates.

d. Inmates recommendations for changes in the Paws and Stripes program

No dogs should be returned to the shelter: "Stop dogs not adopted from having to be returned to the shelter;" expand on dog training schedules making them more evenly distributed; and allow dogs to be housed with inmates to increase social skills in the canines.

3.2. Findings

Direct quotes from inmates: (no participants' names were known to the researchers to further protect the inmates' confidentiality).

“Maybe I’ll try to get a job in this area of work. Train and handle my dog correctly. Talk to people about their dogs, teach them what I have learned.”

“The many times I have visited shelters I would always think to myself how cool it would be to work with animals, especially those in need of love and proper attention.

Now I feel that with all the knowledge I have I would qualify for a job handling the animals.”

“This program has absolutely changed my life. I have learned to love myself and other people, realizing none of us are perfect and if we fail you pick yourself up and try again. I have developed patience and tolerance a willingness to overcome them. I have learned to be victorious rather than defeated.”

“Yes, Paws and Stripes is therapeutic, spending time with dogs affected me and the dogs in a positive way.

Making a difference in the lives of people that need our dogs, once they get adopted helped to give me self-confidence.”

“Having a program like this is such an asset to the community. These dogs become helpers and healers and it’s really amazing to see them get matched up with a person who needs them. It helps the dogs to.”

“Initially, I was apprehensive about training the dogs because they have such important jobs to do. I was nervous about messing up their training, but Deputy Fay (Mrs. Mutter) and Corporal Lamp helped to ease my nervousness and teach me in a respectful way which gave me confidence to train.”

“Dogs shouldn’t get sent back to the shelter because they didn’t have anyone looking to adopt them, we should just continue to train the dog.”

“Bittersweet, because I’m happy they found a home, but sad at the same time because I get attached to them”.

4. Discussion

Participants’ responses regarding their experiences with the Paws and Stripes College program results indicated that this inmate animal prison program provided therapeutic benefits to the inmates by improving their time spent in jail, reducing stressors such as boredom, depression, and anxiety, increasing the inmates confidence, and improving their communication skills through a self-expressed sense of purpose and perceived job enhancement via the development of employable skills, not only limited to canine training but also increases in responsible behavior and caring toward others. Most importantly, the inmates learned within their daily interactions with other inmates and prison staff. In addition, all nine participants discussed the value of learning to work together with an animal to achieve successful alternative outcomes. In particular, several participants discussed the benefits of spending time with different canines, as they felt this helped them learn to understand and interact with different personalities and challenges. Inmates expressed feeling this program helped them learn to interact more positively with people with different personalities in both their families and in the current jail environment.

The participants noted that humans can be judgmental, and many times they are judged for being incarcerated even though they felt a majority of people do not understand what inmates have been through before their incarceration. The inmates reported that the Paws and Stripes College program environment and the presence of a non-judgmental animal provided them a sense of security, allowing for self-exploration of their behaviors and choices in life which were affecting their understanding of themselves and of others.

5. Implications

The human-animal interaction component proves to be a unique aspect utilized in the Paws and Stripes College program and may contribute to its effectiveness. The current study revealed how the Paws and Stripes College program helps to improve inmates’ communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, and interpersonal behaviors within their lives, and has also proven to benefit the shelter animals as well. The shelter animals were provided with improved obedience skills, improved social skills, and through a trained purpose, they were able to serve those with specific needs such as veterans with PTSD and children within the protective services system. These canines are able to provide companionship and value to individuals, families, and their communities, no longer facing euthanasia and being unloved. Additional research is needed to explore the process by which Paws and Stripes College program helps improve the inmates’ behavior while they are incarcerated.

Furthermore, research continuing to follow the Paws and Stripes College program inmates after they are released to society should be conducted. In addition, experimental studies comparing the Paws and Stripes College program to other forms of prison/jail training utilized with this population would highlight the relative effectiveness of this approach versus more traditional forms of prison/jail vocational training programs. Most importantly, we must remember that the Paws and Stripes College program like many other similar canine programs produces a win-win situation. It's good for the dogs, often adopted from shelters where they'd be killed. It's good for the disabled, who experience a new world of freedom with the dogs at their sides, and it can forever change the lives of the inmates^[7,8].

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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