

ANIMALS IN PRISON: IS THERE VALUE IN INMATE-ANIMAL REHABILITATION PROGRAMS?

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ABSTRACT

“Tough on crime” policy in the United States in the late 20th century was found to lead to the phenomenon of mass incarceration without meaningfully reducing crime rates or recidivism. By the late 1990s, most jurisdictions had begun shifting back to an emphasis on prisoner rehabilitation: the attempt to use time spent incarcerated to restore prisoners to “useful citizenry.” To this day, however, efforts to rehabilitate prisoners are often mere PR spin and lip service in correctional institutions throughout the country.

This Article draws on the firsthand experience of its author, a person in custody writer, to explore the rehabilitative potential of inmate–animal interactions. It argues that programs geared toward providing opportunities for these interactions represent a safe, underutilized, and empirically supported approach to prison reform. Research in the fields of criminology, psychology, sociology, and public health, as well as the author’s anecdotal exposure to informal human–animal relationships while incarcerated, suggest that animal-assisted interventions can bolster contemporary rehabilitation efforts. Tangible benefits include reduced recidivism, improved emotional regulation, decreased institutional violence, and enhanced vocational outcomes. The Article concludes that inmate–animal programming is worthy of broader consideration as a durable and humane reform strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

The prison yard siren went off, alerting us that it was time to head back inside. My groundhog pal, Moe, began waddling away. I kept hoping he would turn back and offer some sort of sign that he would miss me, but this isn't Hollywood. The rain hid the tears that refused to be damned. I wasn't sad, per se, I just let myself feel something for the first time since I arrived in SavageVille, and my heart burst.

I shared parts of that story at a group therapy session, where the kind, old counselor with a tight hair bun and glasses so thick they could see into the future went around the room asking us to share the last time we cried. That was, and has been, my one and only prison rehabilitation offering. I guess they figured that I was healed, which is why I rolled my eyes as I read the fine print on the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) memo posted in the Dayroom. It stated:

IDOC Statement of Purpose: The mission of the IDOC is to serve justice in Illinois and increase public safety by promoting positive change in individuals in custody behavior, operating successful reentry programs, and reducing victimization.

Agency Vision: Reduce recidivism by offering seamless, efficient services that are geared toward Individual in Custody rehabilitation.¹

Those words are posted all over the prison, including the visitor's entrance. Dr. Jason Mahn, an Augustana College Professor of Religion who teaches at my prison, eloquently elaborates on the mission statement posted at the East Moline Correctional Center (EMCC) that speaks of rehabilitation and reentry. He writes, "[m]ost incarcerated people have few opportunities to use the time they are 'doing' productively to say nothing of . . . personal transformation. Many of them are hungry—starving, really—for the chance to learn, to grow, to become something other and better than 'the system' tries to make them believe that they are."² The closest thing I've come to real rehabilitation in prison was meeting a pigeon named Buddy and a marmot named Moe. In many real ways, they helped me survive this place.

The human–animal bond provides positive results in various situations, like helping the elderly combat loneliness, alleviating PTSD symptoms for returning veterans, and supporting kids with autism.³ I wondered if animals could help

1. *Agency Overview*, ILL. DEP'T OF CORR., <https://idoc.illinois.gov/aboutus/idocoverview.html> [<https://perma.cc/EHG4-BKQR>] (last visited Mar. 11, 2026) (emphasis added).

2. Jason A. Mahn, *Second Chances and Good Time(s): Transformation and Transaction in Prison*, VOCATION MATTERS (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://vocationmatters.org/2023/02/28/second-chances-and-good-times-transformations-and-transactions-in-prison/> [<https://perma.cc/2SMA-EJGG>].

3. Anna M. van Heeckeren, *The Power of the Human-Animal Bond*, ONE HEALTH (Apr. 1, 2025), <https://www.onehealth.org/blog/the-power-of-the-human-animal-bond> [<https://perma.cc/5XE9-YK82>].

inmates cope with the challenges of incarceration, and if those skills wouldn't lead to other benefits; if that were true, should official inmate-animal programs be given greater emphasis in discussions about inmate rehabilitation programming? This is a question I hope more people will begin asking, but first, some context.

In medical circles, rehabilitation means restoring someone to a previous state, but in the case of someone with criminal thinking, that definition feels counter-productive. For our purposes, and the typical definition in criminal justice circles, rehabilitation means restoring someone to useful citizenry.⁴ It seems obvious that inmate rehabilitation should be about changing mindsets, healing past traumas, addressing mental health and addiction issues, and/or preparing inmates for productive citizenship upon release, or practical things like getting a job, building healthy relationships, etc., but inmate rehabilitation has a complex history.

The United States has a history of shifting its ideology from prison as a place for punishment to prison as a place for rehabilitation.⁵ In fact, early U.S. prison policy ignored inmate rehabilitation programming as an option—prison was meant as revenge or retribution—which is why so many still hold to the “eye for an eye” view of prison.⁶ Dr. Kendra Bowen explains that inmate rehabilitation programming began in the 1930s when President Hoover's Wickersham Commission declared that the current prison policy hurt society and made convicts more dangerous upon their release back to communities.⁷ The punitive, non-rehabilitative approach converted prisons into “Con University,” places that taught convicts how to become better criminals. A new approach was adopted, focusing on trying to help convicts address issues that landed them in prison.⁸ Unfortunately, as crime increased in the '60s, society shifted back towards the revenge/punishment model—a cycle we have seen repeated over and over in America.⁹ New tough-on-crime legislation in the '80s and early '90s packed prisons to overcapacity before studies showed that the get-tough approach wasn't reducing crime or recidivism.¹⁰ By the late '90s, after various studies were published, most U.S. prisons returned to the strategy of rehabilitation as a large-scale initiative, and we've been riding that wave ever since.¹¹ Yet, ask most inmates, and they'll tell you, in practice, inmate rehabilitation is mostly P.R. spin and lip service. Inmate rehabilitation is not prioritized, and thus it's not surprising that recidivism rates still hover around

4. Kendra N. Bowen, *Rehabilitation*, in THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE, 1 (Jay S. Albanese, ed., 2014).

5. *Id.* at 2.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* at 1–2.

8. *Id.* at 2.

9. *Id.*

10. See Elaine R. Jones, *The Failure of the “Get Tough” Crime Policy*, 20 U. DAYTON L. REV. 803, 804 (1995).

11. Bowen, *supra* note 4, at 3.

a ridiculous 70% within five years of release.¹² New, fresh, bold ideas are necessary if we are to reverse the course. Could animal–inmate programming be one of those innovative ideas? Join me as we look into one specific example of an inmate–animal relationship at a prison commonly known as SavageVille.

I.

A PIGEON NAMED BUDDY

Maximum security at Statesville Correctional Center in Crestwood, IL (SavageVille) was my first home upon initial incarceration. Within weeks, I’d seen the prison tactical team beat my neighbor bloody with bat-sized batons for daring to request an extra roll of toilet paper. I saw someone else dragged out of their cell unconscious with a trail of blood coming from their rear end. SavageVille lived up to every bit of its moniker. I kept to myself, laced up, body as though it was a clenched fist. I refused visits and rarely called home. I kept falling deeper into the well, losing the light, until a pigeon came into my life.

Buddy, a fluffy grey and white pigeon with a large white spot on his tiny beak, lived in the rafters of my prison wing. “Did you know Americans domesticated pigeons?” I asked my cellmate, C-section (nicknamed because they say his head is so big he needs a prescription pillow and his mom won’t visit him because she’s still mad that he destroyed her figure). We raced them and used them to communicate over long distances and pre-telephones. People cared for and loved them like pets until technology made them obsolete, and we threw them away. But fully domesticated pigeons die quickly in the wild, so they live in cities in order to be near us. We call them flying rats and shoo them away, but their instincts tell them to trust us, so they come up to us and beg for food. They love us, and *we* hate them, but Buddy was my buddy.

It struck me that Buddy seemed so content, even happy (if one can gauge pigeon emotions) to be in prison. He reminded me of D.H. Lawrence’s poem “Self-Pity”:

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough
without ever having felt sorry for itself.¹³

My winged companion listened patiently as I explained and complained about all the brokenness in prison—the smell, the noise, and the fights. He became my trusty therapist. He never judged, even as I told him I’d considered the easy way out, the coward’s solution. I knew. But one can only fall so deep into the well

12. *Reducing Recidivism: Creating a Path to Successful Re-entry*, FIRST STEP ALL. (July 15, 2021), <https://www.firststepalliance.org/post/reducing-recidivism> [<https://perma.cc/2BML-4GFT>].

13. D.H. Lawrence, *Self-Pity*, ALL POETRY, <https://allpoetry.com/Self-Pity> [<https://perma.cc/9RG5-4ACH>] (last visited Oct. 19, 2025).

before being consumed by the darkness. Feeding Buddy became why I put off my plans. *Who would feed him?* I worried.

I'm not unique in my suicide contemplation in prison. Criminal justice expert Ann Carson, from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, noted suicides increased 85% in state prisons from 2001 to 2019.¹⁴ However, I don't need a body of research to tell me what I see firsthand: Mental health issues in prisons are emblematic of a system that is overwhelmed and out of control. Sociologists and researchers Gonzalez and Connell clearly illustrate this point in their analysis, finding that, "some studies report that at least half of male inmates . . . report symptoms of mental health conditions."¹⁵

Every inmate would benefit from mental health services. This mind warp will change anyone. The only question is how much damage can one endure before being permanently destroyed. There are neither enough therapists nor the budget to hire the necessary staff.¹⁶ According to a recent *New York Times* investigative feature piece, the U.S. jail and prison system is the largest provider of mental health treatment in the nation, and yet these facilities are "dangerously unequipped to provide adequate treatment to incarcerated people with mental health issues."¹⁷ It's clear that bold new ideas and creative solutions must be sought, like, say, animals in prison. Studies show animal interactions and ownership—especially dogs, the empathy superheroes in the animal community—help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.¹⁸ Prison journalist Charlotte West wrote in her piece "Behind bars, women in Washington learn to care for pets—and themselves" about this very point:

Pets help reduce stress and anxiety, encourage people to be physically active, and increase social connections, according to a March 2024 survey from the American Psychiatric Association and the American Veterinary Medical Association. Experts say that animals may also help with drug and alcohol recovery, as well as those experiencing depression and other psychiatric

14. E. ANN CARSON, U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., SUICIDE IN LOCAL JAILS AND STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONS, 2000–2019 – STATISTICAL TABLES 1 (2021).

15. Jennifer M. Reingle Gonzalez & Nadine M. Connell, *Mental Health of Prisoners: Identifying Barriers to Mental Health Treatment and Medication Continuity*, 104 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 2328, 2328–33 (2014).

16. *Id.*

17. Sara Vogel, *The Deadly Consequences of Mental Illness in Prison . . . And Other News on Solitary Confinement This Week*, SOLITARY WATCH (May 8, 2024), <https://solitary-watch.org/2024/05/08/the-deadly-consequences-of-mental-illness-in-prisonand-other-news-on-solitary-confinement-this-week/> [<https://perma.cc/AZ6G-F469>].

18. Nat'l Inst. of Health, *The Power of Pets*, NEWS HEALTH (Feb. 2018), <https://news-inhealth.nih.gov/2018/02/power-pets> [<https://perma.cc/6WMC-NJNH>].

conditions.¹⁹

I know the kind of joy and peace dogs bring to a tortured soul. I grew up in a tough neighborhood as a bit of a nerd, built like a wet noodle with two open car doors for ears. Desperate for friends, I would often dog-nap the neighborhood mutts to play veterinarian. My folks often found me bandaging the neighbor's schnauzer in our basement. I'd bring home strays and hide them in my closet. Now, 20 years later, in the unlikeliest of places, I would finally get a pet of my own.

II.

ENTER THE STOOGES

Anyone who's done time at SavageVille knows the Stooges. Inmate writer Dole mentioned these three groundhogs in a *Life Inside* article published in collaboration with *Vice Magazine*, "My Best Friends in Prison are Frogs, Turtles, and Raccoons."²⁰ He reports, "I arrived at Statesville Correctional Center . . . it does have at least one fox, though, and groundhogs. We feed the groundhogs daily, which makes them incredibly fat."²¹

The first time I saw Moe, Larry, and Curly, they looked skinny. I learned they lost a third of their body weight after hibernating from October through March. They often stand statue-still, reared up on their hind legs as they survey the grounds for potential danger. If they spot an enemy, they let out a high-pitched warning whistle, hence the other name they go by: whistle pigs. They're also called woodchucks, although they don't actually chuck wood.²²

One morning at yard, I walked in the brisk spring air listening to the Boss (Bruce Springsteen) croon about his Glory Days and sipping my cup of joe when the Stooges magically appeared. I sat down no more than fifty yards from them. They ignored me. I called to them. They ignored me. I looked away for an instant, and Larry (because he has a mess of a head of fur) disappeared into the ground.

Groundhogs dig tunnels five feet deep and thirty feet long with multiple entrances and exits. They even create separate chambers to use as bathrooms. Curly (because he barely had any head fur) licked himself like a cat before also disappearing into one of the tunnels. Moe (because he was in charge) turned my way and began to waddle over. He looked like an Ewok, especially the round ears.

19. Charlotte West, *Behind bars, WA women learn to care for pets and themselves*, SEATTLE TIMES (May 17, 2024), <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/behind-bars-wa-women-learn-to-care-for-pets-and-themselves> [<https://perma.cc/3G8P-Y79T>].

20. Joseph Dole, *My Best Friends in Prison are Frogs, Turtles, and Raccoons*, MARSHALL PROJECT (Jan. 12, 2017), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2017/01/12/my-best-friends-in-prison-are-frogs-turtles-and-raccoons> [<https://perma.cc/J4A2-RT24>].

21. *Id.*

22. Bill Willis & Claire Long, *Do Woodchucks Chuck Wood?*, NAT'L INST. ENV'T HEALTH SCIS. (July, 2015), <https://kids.niehs.nih.gov/topics/natural-world/wildlife/animals/woodchuck-chuck> [<https://perma.cc/JU24-RXG6>].

Brandon Keim, a groundhog behavioral researcher studying the community habits of groundhogs, described one of her groundhogs scarily similarly to Moe: “sleek, sturdy, with small, serious eyes, delicate whiskers, and fur that shaded from auburn on her broad chest to a mélange of chestnut, straw, and russet across the rest of her body.”²³

Moe made eye contact, and a part of me tensed up. The size of his four gleaming white incisors seemed to grow exponentially with every step. Moe hesitated as if he sensed my fear. I took a deep breath and trusted C-section’s assurances, “They’ll eat right out of your hand.” Moe stood on his hind legs and sniffed at me as if to say, “*where are the snacks, dude?*” He begged without a whiff of self-awareness or shame, just out on a lovely morning looking for a snack. The yard siren went off, and I looked off towards the guard shack. When I turned around, Moe had already waddled away. As I headed back toward my building, I began to make mental notes: I needed peanut butter packets and fruit and veggies. I might even buy some “exclusive” produce off the inmate black market. *I wondered if groundhogs like onions?* I needed to do some research. *I’d call my family tonight,* I decided. I was excited. Thoughts about hurting myself began to dwindle.

III.

INMATES AND ANIMALS

The idea that this interaction with a groundhog had affected me so deeply made me wonder what other effects animals might have on inmates. Shouldn’t rehabilitation programs go beyond the question of “does it reduce recidivism?” Instead, they could ask “how can we include programs that actually help inmates mentally and emotionally?” What if they did more? What if inmate programs could go beyond these walls and benefit society directly by helping empower individuals with special needs? Or inside these walls: What if they reduced inmate-officer and inmate-inmate violent incidents? What if they worked as a release valve for all the pressure in prison? What if they offered vocational training and employment opportunities upon release? What if they went beyond changing behavior to changing the very identity of an inmate? Could such a program exist? What if they weren’t official programs at all and simply existed in secret inmate-animal interactions?

In journalist Corrine Ramey’s piece, “Tiger the Cat Finds a Home at Sing Sing,” Ramey writes about the last tabby cat left living among inmates at the notoriously dangerous Sing Sing prison.²⁴ The point of her story is best illustrated in her quote of filmmaker David Hoffman, who taught drama at the prison: “The

23. Brandon Keim, *Groundhogs Emerge from the Scientific Shadows*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 1, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/01/science/groundhogs-animal-behavior.html> [https://perma.cc/SN33-6HBB].

24. Corrine Ramey, *Tiger, an Orange Tabby, Is One of the Last Cats at Sing Sing*, WALL ST. J. (Aug. 30, 2017), https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiger-one-of-the-last-cats-at-sing-sing-finds-a-family-in-prison-1504103942?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

sweetness of the way inmates treated the animals was beautiful to me . . . some of the most hardened inmates were totally antisocial and hated other people, but you would see them caring for these cats.”²⁵ The only brutality in the article comes from someone wearing a different uniform.²⁶ A Sing Sing correctional officer found a box of kittens at the prison and ordered an inmate to kill them.²⁷ When the inmate refused, the officer threw the kittens into the trash compactor.²⁸ The guard was prosecuted and sentenced to a year in prison.²⁹

Another article about cats in prison comes from reporter Jack Nicas: “Cats Filled the Prison. Then the Inmates Fell in Love.”³⁰ He reports on cats living among inmates in Chile’s oldest and most overcrowded prison.³¹ Nicas quotes the prison’s warden, Col. Helen Leal Gonzalez, “Prisons are hostile places . . . [s]o of course, when you see there’s an animal giving affection and generating these positive feelings, it logically causes a change in behavior, a change in mindset.”³² The article later notes that “the cats provide something invaluable in a lockup notorious for overcrowding and squalid conditions: love, affection and acceptance.”³³ Was the cats’ presence really tied to helping keep the prison under control? For prisons around the world, a similar pattern was developing.³⁴

A handful of unique animal–inmate programs exist around the world.³⁵ According to the article “Australian Prison Provides Rehabilitation for Inmates and Animals,” an outback prison houses a wildlife center where inmates care for injured or abandoned “kangaroos, emus, wombats, snakes, and cockatoos,” among others.³⁶ A senior wildlife officer explains their effect on the inmate community, “[a]nimals show [love and respect] unconditionally, they don’t judge. . . . It’s a real positive impact, and the animals can actually sometimes help people heal.”³⁷ The article also notes that “the scheme instills a sense of responsibility and develops life skills for offenders preparing for the outside world.”³⁸ Beyond psychological advantages, there are many pragmatic benefits to these programs. Inmates volunteering in the animal programs learn skills that can lead to jobs upon

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.*

30. Jack Nicas, *Cats Filled the Prison. Then the Inmates Fell in Love*, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 31, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/31/world/americas/cat-prison-chile.html>.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

35. See, e.g., AFP News, *Australian prison provides rehab for inmates and animals*, RFI (Aug. 8, 2017), <https://www.rfi.fr/en/contenu/20170824-australian-prison-provides-rehab-inmates-and-animals> [<https://perma.cc/FG6R-9FNL>].

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.*

38. *Id.*

release.³⁹ In Australia, some inmates secured jobs in wildlife work upon release.⁴⁰ Here in the United States, various prisons in the Southwest started programs allowing inmates to train untamed mustangs in order to cull wild populations and get them ready for public sale.⁴¹ *Men's Journal* contributor Noah Gallagher Shannon writes about the positive influence horses seem to have on the inmates participating in the program: "It [the horse program] boasts a 15 percent recidivism rate compared with the 70 percent national average. This likely owes to the fact that, unlike other prison gigs, training horses offers discipline and freedom in equal measure."⁴² It's clear there is a reciprocal relationship between inmates helping animals and, in turn, animals helping inmates. In my case, I assure you that the Stooges helped me more than I helped them.

IV.

MOESHA

I'd spent months building my relationship with the Stooges, primarily Moe. I'd meet them in the yard next to a small knoll by the northernmost wall. I imagine they picked up on my scent and communicated among themselves via the scent sacs located under their forelegs and near their anus.⁴³ I fed them veggie scraps and the occasional peanut butter packet. I worried about their weight. They were packing on pounds quickly. Who knows how many other inmates fed them? Moe was borderline domesticated. He allowed me to pat him on the head while he ate. His fur, gruff and tough to the touch, yet what a thrill to pet a wild animal. I made him a makeshift leash from a couple of shoelaces and once made it almost ten steps before he gave up. Moe, the smallest, nicest, and I presumed youngest of the bunch (since groundhogs tend to get grouchier with age⁴⁴) became my ready friend. The Stooges, likely females (as only female groundhogs live in small, related clans⁴⁵) gave the impression of a family unit. I wondered if I shouldn't start calling Moe by the more appropriate name, Moesha? I spent that first year in prison obsessed with groundhogs. Officers and inmates alike began to call me the groundhog whisperer. They would come by my cell and donate fruit or fresh "exclusive" vegetables not available at Chow. I became friends with a small group of like-minded animal lovers, and we often exchanged info and updates on our encounters with the Stooges. Life in prison fell into a semblance of normality. I felt my body unclenching.

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.*

41. Noah Gallagher Shannon, *Inmates Are Saving America's Wild Mustangs, One Horse at a Time*, *MEN'S J.* (Feb. 28, 2020), <https://www.mensjournal.com/travel/inmates-wild-horses>.

42. *Id.*

43. Melissa Thornberry, *The Surprising Skills Groundhogs Have Beyond Weather Prediction*, *BERRY PATCH FARMS* (May 20, 2024), <https://www.berrypatchfarms.net/what-surprising-skill-do-groundhogs-have/> [<https://perma.cc/C5EM-RWNW>].

44. Keim, *supra* note 24.

45. *Id.*

In the last week of August that first year, a wicked summer storm blew through the prison, knocking out the power and flooding the decks. On a Level One lockdown and unable to leave my cell, I worried about the Stooges. *Can they forage for themselves?* I wondered. In the wild, they only live two to four years. But, in captivity, they can live up to three times longer. My nerves caved to my demons. I made some prison hooch out of the rotting fruit that I had saved for them. The next morning, much to my surprise, they called yard early. I was still hurting from the previous festivities, but I got myself together and stumbled out into the blazing sun. Moe stood waiting for me, but I tripped and almost crushed her as I approached. She jetted off and refused to return for the rest of the day. I never drank again.

Later that summer, I learned about a new dog program available at Shawnee Correctional Center; I put in for a transfer immediately. A part of me worried about leaving the Stooges, but I reasoned that I was leaving them in good hands. I imagined the wonder of sharing a cell with a cute lab puppy and training him to be a therapy dog. I read about the program and its various accolades.

Writer Roxanne Squire reports about this program that teaches inmates how to train pups to become therapy dogs for veterans suffering from PTSD.⁴⁶ The inmates even build temporary living quarters for their dogs. She notes, “[i]t’s an inspiring way to work on simultaneous rehabilitation for both inmates and military veterans dealing with post-traumatic stresses of combat.”⁴⁷ In a University of Illinois Veterinary School blog, third-year vet student and Shawnee prison dog program volunteer Dria Talley writes, “[l]iving with dogs changes the behavior of everyone that interacts with them. The dogs help alleviate tensions and give the inmates an outlet to be creative and kind, and the offenders are getting into fewer fights.”⁴⁸ I imagined how lucky and cool it would be to participate in a program that not only gave me something important and valuable to achieve, but maybe a job as a dog trainer upon release. Despite all of the benefits, only a few prisons participate in human-animal programming.⁴⁹ It’s clear animal interactions in prison have value, but do they address the most important marker for political forces when considering prison rehabilitation programming: recidivism?

46. Roxanne Squires, *Illinois Correctional Center Inmates Training Dogs to Help Veterans*, CORR. NEWS (July 23, 2018), <https://correctionalnews.com/2018/07/23/45304/> [<https://perma.cc/PYH7-5RPM>].

47. *Id.*

48. Dria Talley, *Correctional Center Connects with Canines*, UNIV. ILL. URBANA-CHAMPAIGN COLL. OF VETERINARY MED. (Jan. 25, 2022), <https://vetmed.illinois.edu/2022/01/25/correctional-center-connects-with-canines/> [<https://perma.cc/C7DJ-SQ5B>].

49. For example, as of 2018, there were 255 known prison-based dog programs, including programs that occur in jail settings. See Tyler Han, Erin Flynn, Joseph Winchell, Emily Gould, Jaci Gandenberger, Dana Barattin, Philip Tedeschi, & Kevin Morris, *Prison-Based Dog Training Programs: Standard Protocol*, INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN-ANIMAL CONNECTION 1 (Oct. 2018). Yet, there are over 4,700 state and federal prisons and local jails, combined. Wendy Sawyer & Peter Wagner, *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2025*, PRISON POL’Y INITIATIVE (Mar. 11, 2025), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html> [<https://perma.cc/89AA-9CQR>].

V.

PRISON-BASED DOG TRAINING PROGRAMS

Dog programs in prison consistently show decreased recidivism rates among program participants.⁵⁰ In the article about the cats in the Chilean prison, Nica quotes a meta-study of 20 dog prison programs from around the world.⁵¹ He notes researcher Beatriz Villafaina-Domínguez's summary of the results: "a decrease in recidivism, improved empathy, improved social skills, and a safer and more positive relationships between inmates and prison officials."⁵² According to journalist Hilda Burke, one Californian prison dog program cites a zero (!) percent recidivism rate for ex-offenders who had participated in the program.⁵³ Prison administrations should be ecstatic about these recidivism statistics, as they also consider lowering recidivism rates important when evaluating potential inmate programming.⁵⁴ But are these animal programs that reduce recidivism rates just a byproduct of larger psychological healing at work inside offenders? Dog programs offer more than reduced recidivism rates or increased job prospects; they offer life-changing psychological healing.⁵⁵ Burke notes changes in the character and identity of program-participating inmates, finding that "the experience of people believing in them, learning that they're innately worthy and, crucially, lovable, are for many of these men new and life-changing concepts."⁵⁶ Rehabilitation, which is more than a simple shift in thinking, is a whole new way of seeing and interacting with the world. This reminds me of my favorite metaphor for inmate rehabilitation from Augustana College Chaplain Melinda Papillo. During a recent Zoom with my Religion class, she explained her view of rehabilitation as like a parent scooping up an unruly child and holding them close to protect them from hurting themselves or others. "They will hold them in love until the children calm down and re-center themselves," she said. In the absence of that loving embrace, maybe some inmates find a similar unconditional love in the animals left in their care. But not everyone is sold on inmate-animal programming.

50. Nicas, *supra* note 30.

51. *Id.*

52. *Id.*

53. Hilda Burke, *Pets in Prison: The Rescue Dogs Teaching Californian Inmates Trust and Responsibility*, GUARDIAN (Apr. 19, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/life-andstyle/2020/apr/19/pets-in-prison-the-rescue-dogs-teaching-californian-inmates-trust-and-responsibility> [<https://perma.cc/RXS2-XN6V>].

54. See GRANT DUWE, NAT'L INST. JUST., THE USE AND IMPACT OF CORRECTIONAL PROGRAMMING FOR INMATES ON PRE- AND POST-RELEASE OUTCOMES 1 (2017), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250476.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/T4Z6-4WCD>] (explaining that correctional programming is often intended to lower recidivism).

55. Burke, *supra* note 53.

56. *Id.*

Some argue that these programs waste time.⁵⁷ Yet we know inmates have trained thousands of dogs to help veterans suffering from PTSD, disabled people live with dignity, the elderly combat loneliness, and families adopt safe, socialized dogs—there are countless examples of these inmate-trained dogs and horses changing lives for the better, sometimes even saving them.⁵⁸ Others argue that inmates don't deserve “pets” in prison.⁵⁹ In response to them, I'd quote columnist Sharon Dierberger in her piece, “New Tricks,” about just such a skeptic:

Dyan Larson works for Can Do Canines as a dog instructor at three Wisconsin prisons. She was initially skeptical about the program, believing prisoners should pay for their crimes, not play with dogs. But now, she tears up talking about the work they do. She's seen inmates change, becoming more compassionate and patient, better fathers and husbands, more respectable, more respectful. They see the dogs blossom under their care and attention, and that spills over to how they treat others. Success with the dogs seems to spark inmates' desire for success in other areas of their lives.⁶⁰

Prison-based dog training programs do come with challenges, including issues related to funding, staffing, and operating in a correctional setting.⁶¹ But those concerns should be put in the context of the research and quotes I've found from prison psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, prison officials, think tank leaders, animal program workers, volunteers, and current and past inmate program participants—all of which point to the same conclusion: animal programs in prison

57. See generally DOUGLAS LIPTON, ROBERT MARTINSON & JUDITH WILKS, *THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CORRECTIONAL TREATMENT: A SURVEY OF TREATMENT EVALUATION STUDIES* (1975) (a widely cited study that became synonymous with the tagline “Nothing Works!” with regard to carceral rehabilitation); JAMES WILSON, *THINKING ABOUT CRIME* (1975) (arguing that it would be difficult, if not impossible for most prisoners to meaningfully reform while incarcerated). The argument that rehabilitation doesn't work or is a waste of time underwrote much of the “tough on crime” criminal justice reform that occurred throughout the late 1900s, culminating in bills like the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 that have contributed directly to the phenomena of mass incarceration today. See Lauren-Brooke Eisen, *The 1994 Crime Bill and Beyond: How Federal Funding Shapes the Criminal Justice System*, BRENNAN CTR. JUST. (Sep. 9, 2019), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/1994-crime-bill-and-beyond-how-federal-funding-shapes-criminal-justice> [<https://perma.cc/JLJ8-NT4M>].

58. Burke, *supra* note 53.

59. Rebecca J. Huss, *Canines (and Cats!) in Correctional Institutions: Legal and Ethical Issues Relating to Companion Animal Programs*, 14 NEV. L.J. 25, 36 (2013).

60. Sharon Dierberger, *New Tricks*, WORLD (Aug. 25, 2022), <https://wng.org/articles/new-tricks-1661060041> [<https://perma.cc/G86X-X8D2>].

61. See generally TYLER M. HAN, ERIN FLYNN, JOSEPH WINCHELL, EMILY GOULD, JACI GANDENBERGER, DANA BARATTIN, PHILIP TEDESCHI, & KEVIN N. MORRIS, INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN-ANIMAL CONNECTION, *PRISON-BASED DOG TRAINING PROGRAMS: STANDARD PROTOCOL* (2018), https://sustainabilityinprisons.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Prison-Based-Dog-Training-Programs_-Standard-Protocol.pdf [<https://perma.cc/GFY6-9Y4Y>].

show positive results on various levels from the personal to the communal.⁶² But maybe a quote from Dria's University of Illinois blog about a guard's experience at Shawnee might help them understand: "The guard, an intimidating man in his 50s, even shed a few tears when he told us about the changes he has seen in the inmates. It was extremely moving, and I guarantee there was not a single dry eye in the room."⁶³ Inmate–animal dog programs, and also animals outside of organized programs, are consistently shown to be beneficial.

VI.

A NEW BEGINNING

Yet despite these positive effects, the weather turned. Unfortunately, I wasn't accepted into the dog program. Instead, I was approved to transfer to Dixon Correctional Center (Dixon). The Stooges, putting on pre-hibernation weight, easily weighed fifteen plus pounds each by now. I spoke to the Stoooge Crew and let them know I would be leaving. C-section promised to keep feeding Buddy, "against his better judgement" he said. He talked a tough game, but I caught him feeding Buddy a few times when he thought I was out of sight. I think the story about how we discarded pigeons struck a chord with him. I got word that I would be on the next transfer bus. In the pouring rain, I went out to yard with my last peanut butter packets and let the Stooges go wild. Their tiny hands, squeezing the packets, brought me joy that no number of words could convey. I explained to their bright, curious eyes that I would be leaving, and something got stuck in my throat. Of course, they could not care less. I knew they could not understand me. Then the yard siren blared, and I watched my friends waddle back to their dens.

Two days later, I arrived at Dixon. In Receiving, my new cellmate told me I would see deer through the fence (no more wall!) next to the woods adjacent to the prison grounds. Blue jays, cardinals, and all manner of birds lived in the many trees scattered around the prison yard (trees?!), and a few groundhogs lived in the northeast corner of the yard.

CONCLUSION

I believe this research proves inmate–animal interactions in prisons have positive and far-reaching benefits to multiple stakeholders, offering a viable rehabilitation approach that would—among many other benefits—reduce recidivism, making society safer. Inmate–animal programs contribute to positive mental health, which can reduce suicide attempts, drug use, and violence (inmate–inmate

62. See Silvia Villafaina, Daniel Collado-Mateo, Eugenio Merellano-Navarro, Santos Villafaina, *Effects of Dog-Based Animal-Assisted Interventions in Prison Population: A Systematic Review*, 10 *ANIMALS* 2129 (Nov. 24, 2020), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7697666/>; Wendy G. Turner, *The Experiences of Offenders in a Prison Canine Program*, 71 *FED. JUD. CTR.* 1 (2009), https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/71_1_6_0.pdf [<https://perma.cc/LS4B-PSLL>]. (finding patience learned by inmates having dogs can be transferred to interactions with people).

63. Talley, *supra*, note 48.

and inmate–officer), making prison safer and cheaper to operate.⁶⁴ These programs create jobs and reduce recidivism.⁶⁵ They contribute to society by providing trained animals for families or those in need.⁶⁶ They change the very identity of a person in custody away from criminal thinking, which in turn makes the public safer when they return to society.⁶⁷

All of this research begs the question: Why aren't prisons instituting these programs nationwide? Because some might argue that human–animal inmate programs feel “soft” on crime? Because politicians feel human–animal inmate programs may be a hard sell to the public, versus more mainstream ideas like drug rehabilitation or anger management classes? I do not know. I do know, however, that inmate rehabilitation in fulfillment of its stated mission could result in creating a safer society, and I believe that human–animal programs help get us to that end.

Maybe these types of animal programs are underutilized because inmate–animal programs do not fit neatly into some category like education/vocational or therapeutic, or because they don't address specific issues like substance abuse or domestic abuse. The reality is that inmate–animal programs have a crossover effect and thus fall into multiple categories, offering multiple benefits.

Interestingly, enough dogs live in shelters today to give every man, woman, and child in detention a companion dog to train or socialize. I envision a future where either wildlife refuges or animal shelters are housed outside of prisons. In some research, prisons found ways to make their animal programs profitable. Has a viable rehabilitation option been staring at us with its big brown eyes this whole time?

I know an effort of this magnitude would be difficult, even painful, at first, but I also know that beauty and a certain type of freedom can be found on the other side of pain . . . if only we muster the courage to try.

64. Lorin Hill, *Becoming the Person Your Dog Thinks You Are: An Assessment of Florida Prison-Based Dog Training Programs on Post-Release Recidivism*, 5 CORR. POL'Y PRAC. & RSCH. 149 (2018); See also Daisy Corleto, *Prison Rehabilitation: The Sociological, Physiological, and Psychological Effects of Animal-Assisted Interventions*, 6 THEMIS: RSCH. J. JUST. STUD. & FORENSIC SCI. 112 (2018), <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=themis>.

65. Hill, *supra* note 64, at 77.

66. See *Paws for Life Prison Program*, PAWS FOR LIFE K9 RESCUE <https://pawsforlifek9.org/paws-for-life-prison-program/> (last visited Mar. 10, 2026).

67. See generally Nicas, *supra* note 30.