

Animals behind bars. A study on rehabilitation programs involving animals in Italian prisons.

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Abstract

Although animal-assisted interventions (AAIs)--including animal-assisted therapy (AATs), animal-assisted activities (AAAs), or animal-assisted learning (AALs)--have been reported to help rehabilitate criminal offenders, their use here is not well-studied. This exploratory study aims to gather information on AAIs in Italian correctional facilities. Two hundred and seven (93%) out of 223 facilities responsible for prisoners were contacted; 74 (36%) completed the telephone survey. Responding facilities included 7 (9%) for delinquent youths, 47 (63%) prisons, 6 (8%) detention centres, 1 psychiatric unit (1%), and 13 (18%) facilities that are prisons and detention centres. Sixty-four facilities (86%) have regulations about the presence of animals, and 19 facilities (26%) offer at least one AAI program (totalling 31 AAIs). Fourteen of the 31 programs (45%) involve dogs (aged <2 months to >10 years), four (13%) involve stray cats (estimated ages: <1 week to >15 years), two (6%) involve farm animals (ages for cows: <1 week to >10 years; pigs: <1 week to >20 years), two (6%) organise wildlife care, three (10%) involve horses (aged 3 - 20 years), three (10%) facilities work with fish, two (6%) involve bees, and 1 (3%) involves turtles. None of the animals were trained. The goals and natures of the AAI programs differed strongly. At 2 facilities, animals worked in AATs guided by psychotherapists assisted by animal handlers and volunteers. Two AAAs were guided by trained teachers. Activities (AAAs) with no special goals were conducted in 27 programs (87%), without any supervision (5) or under supervision of prison employees. None of the practitioners received AAI training. Two facilities have exclusion criteria for sex offenders or offenders under maximum security and two facilities reported possible negative effects such as problems with animal management, housing conditions, and hygiene from animal contact. These results indicated sources of serious concern and warrant further investigation.

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