

Reinventing the Self: The Role of Prison Dog Programs in Creating Positive, Lasting Internal Change among Formerly Incarcerated Male Participants



Photo: Rita Earl Blackwell

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What are Prison-Dog Programs?



Pictured: Paws for Life Prison
Program

Photo: Rita Earl Blackwell

pawsforlifek9.org/paws-for-life-prison-program



**The
Human-Animal
Bond**



The PDP: What we already know

- ▶ “Intermediate outcomes”:
significant reductions in serious infractions, violent infractions, and grievances filed
- ▶ Positive socio-behavioral effects like the development of communication, responsibility, commitment, and respect
- ▶ Psychological and emotional tenets of self-control, self-confidence, bonding, trust, and patience are prevalent in the PDP literature
- ▶ Enhanced empathy, emotional regulation, and increased emotional intelligence



Photo: Rita Earl Blackwell

Research Process and Population

- In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with 29 formerly incarcerated men who had participated in PDPs nationwide (IRB approval)
- “Purposive sampling” accessed through networks and contacts
- Zoom interviews, \$50 gift card (support from/collaboration with Institute for Human Animal Connection (IHAC), Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver)
- To be eligible, interviewees had to be released for 5 months minimum. Average 2.4 years.

-Participants had been between 14-40 when they committed their crime that led to prison (average 20 years)

Participants were between the ages of 31 and 63 (average 43 years) at time of interview

-On average, participants had initially been sentenced to 28.1 years in prison and served 18.8 years

-74% percent had received at least one life sentence at their initial sentencing

-On average, participants spent 35 months in the PDP

-All names are pseudonyms



Based on results from the in-depth interviews with formerly incarcerated men who participated in Prison-Dog Programs (PDPs), I examine how participating in the PDP facilitated nuanced and specific inner change processes that moved the men towards pro-social behavior and positive re-entry. Two key trajectories:

- ▶ Investment in and connection with dog
- ▶ Work with other humans towards common goal of the dog's well being

Background Considerations

- Various forms of marginalization limit the resources available to some boys and men to perform legitimate and socially valued versions of masculinity
- “Criminogenic masculinity” is an alternative characterized by violence, risk taking, and illegal behaviors (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2000, 2005; Morris, 2012; Rios, 2011).
- Criminogenic masculinity must constantly be performed/proven. Overcompensation manifests in ongoing violence and crime.
- Early emotional injuries can also play a role in how boys come to adopt street or criminogenic masculinity.
 - For example, adolescent gang members report high levels of childhood victimization, including sexual and physical abuse and exposure to domestic and community violence, and these types of victimization heighten the likelihood of gang membership, with direct and witnessed victimization causing an 18% increase in risk for gang entry (Merrin et al., 2020).
 - Criminal peer groups or gangs appear to offer acceptance and “love,” while also requiring the “tough” front-facing presentation characteristic of street masculinity (see Anderson, 1999; Messerschmidt 1993, 2000, 2005; Mullins 2006).



Participants' Narratives of Core Emotional Deficits

Throughout their narratives, participants recalled traumatic contexts in their early lives that led to them to see themselves, in their words, as “unlovable,” “worthless,” and “defective.” Twenty-one of the twenty-nine (72%) men described experiencing or witnessing violence and abuse in their family of origin. Victimization intersected with other hardships, and these circumstances created deep emotional and psychic wounds that solidified core feelings of deficiency.

For example: Gabriel ended up in foster care after being physically abused by his mother and molested by a sibling's father. He lived in fear of his mother, a dynamic that shaped a core narrative:

“I grew up with this narrative that I was unlovable, that I wasn't worthy, because my own mother treated me as such.”

Carrying Emotional Deficits Into Prison

Going to prison did little to assuage the need for acceptance and love, but it did create a new venue through which it was sought, leading some into prison “politics”:

“I was more involved in prison politics and the criminal lifestyle. I didn't know that I was motivated by fear, you know what I mean? Because it mattered what people thought of me, that really mattered to me. I had this false perception of how I should carry myself and what and how I should be because I didn't want to be taken advantage of. I didn't want to be picked on, so I was willing to fight for my love, for my respect for whatever it is that I believe, this false thing that I had going on in my mind at that time . . . I was involved in two riots. My belief was at that time is that I'm not getting out of prison. You know, my life is over. I don't care. I got a life term, you know? I didn't realize that I was still dealing with a sense of belonging, that I still wanted to be loved. I wanted to be accepted. I wanted that validation. Therefore, I was still doing what I was doing when I was younger. I just continued in prison to continue that cycle, but in a different setting, different environment.” –Joaquin

Background

Considerations con't

- ▶ Incarceration is associated with emotional withdrawal (Stoll, 2024) and negative feelings like powerlessness (McGuinn, 2018), not positive change.
- ▶ Maier & Ricciardelli's (2022) formerly incarcerated participants attributed positive changes they experienced while incarcerated to changes to self while in the prison environment. This related to “their ability to either dig deep and find self or to reinvent” themselves (p. 786).
- ▶ Most rehabilitation programs in prison provide only “truncated” opportunities for growth. PDPs are rehabilitation programs that are qualitatively different and unique in how they accelerate positive personal change.





Participating in the PDP facilitated nuanced and specific inner change processes that moved the men towards pro-social behavior and positive re-entry. Two key trajectories:

- ▶ Investment in and connection with dog
- ▶ Work with other humans towards common goal of the dog's well being

1. Investment in and connection with dog

It was through relationships with their dogs in the PDP that participants moved into more open, emotional positions of vulnerability, empathy and care. As the façade fell away, emotional energy was redirected towards healing from the past, moving participants towards a more loving worldview.

Their bonds with dogs developed through:

- Relating with traumatic pasts
- Building trust to get training results from dogs
- Unconditional love
- Worthy of love = profoundly humanizing



Photo: Craig O'Neal

Traumatic Pasts:

“I lived in a cage my entire life . . . I want to be acknowledged like a human. I was in the cage like the dog that’s sitting inside those kennels . . . I lived in dog cages. I know what it’s like. I know what it’s like to be the one that’s wearing chains. What it’s like to become an animal to survive.” (MaShawn)

Building Trust:

They give me that dog and so I have to learn to trust the dog as the dog learns to trust me. And, you know, I learned a lot in the program, mainly empathy. That's like the biggest thing for me is that because I, you know, I have a really [sic] distrust of human for a long time. And so, I think my gateway to return to that trust is through the dog, through the animal. It's very easy for me to trust the animal, show them affection, because I don't have to have fear of judgment from them, you know. Once I do that, when I was able to open myself up and the way that program [is] designed, it invite(s) you to do that. (Kahn)

Unconditional Love:

Because it wasn't until later that I realized that a lot of the love I got in the streets was conditional, plain and simple. It's like you get that love, it's time to go, let's go to work, let's go beat up this dude, and if I say no, ok, they would withdraw that love. It gets to the point where you start going against moral values in order to obtain more love, you know, like I know you should not go rob this store, but I know that if I don't, my homies are not going to love me. But if I know if I do, I'm gonna get praise, I'm gonna get affirmations, I'm gonna get all kinds of love and that's the love we're pursuing. It wasn't until later that I realized, I was looking for love in the wrong places and in the wrong way. (George)

Being in the dog program I was able to learn more about myself to where I could care more about myself and love myself . . . the dogs, like, they love me no matter what. (Julian)

Being Worthy of Love = Humanizing:

My biggest concern was staying stuck, and Sweetie's the thing that allowed me to get outta that stuck. She was my pivot point.

What the dog program gave me, the emotional side of becoming a human being again, and not an inmate. See, work release doesn't provide you that, work release just gets you a job! That's not what inmates need to become free of prison, that, that's not what we're lacking in. We're lacking in emotion.

I do know that the base of who I am as a human being today, how I've gotten to where I am is because of what started with her and the dog program . . . Sweetie was pertinent definitely towards me learning to be a human and to care for others again. (Josh)

2. Working Together for the Success of the Dog

- Unity derived from a common goal or cause
- Humanizing Relationships
- Self-Governance



Photo: Rita Earl Blackwell

Unity from a Common Cause

Especially when you're in prison where you don't show emotion, you don't show affection. And to be able to do that with an animal, to express love, just care and to take care of him . . . my self-worth for a long time was negative and a lot of people accepted that, a lot of people admired that. And now to switch that all that around and to use that for good and to see that you can do good, and you could help and you can reach a goal with the three of us that take care of our dog. And to come as a group, as a team, and to figure out what's the best for our dog . . . And this is with different races, and different minds, different attitudes, everything, but coming together for one goal to get our dog where it needs to get. Where it needs to be, to be adopted. It's life changing. (Diego)

Humanizing Relationships

The dog program helped me view my partners within the program as more human, to try to understand them, 'cause we all come from different backgrounds. You have whites, Mexicans, African Americans and so on, you meet people from different backgrounds. It's not, "Oh I'm gonna go with all Mexicans in the dog program." No. It's, "ok, I gotta get along with this guy." My partner Joe is obviously American. I'm Mexican . . . for me, that was cool that we were able to do that, that it helped me view people beyond their skin color, and the prejudices that are enforced upon us within the prison system. (Daniel)

A New Type of Self-Governance

Every problem we had, we dealt with internally in the dog program. We don't need to go to the program people, because we know how to govern ourselves. We're grown men. The prison politics society would never allow you to do that. Never. So all that got chucked aside. The gangs, everything got shut to the side.
(Gerald)

RECAP: Identity shifts away from criminogenic masculinity and towards prosocial identity

Two Trajectories:

1. Investment in and connection with dog
 - Relating with trauma
 - Building trust
 - Unconditional love
 - Worthy/humanizing
2. Work with other humans towards dog's well being
 - Unity from common goal
 - Humanizing Relationships
 - Self-Governance



Photo: Craig O'Neal

Re-Entry Implications

These are the things that tending to and caring for the dogs helped me see and how I should interact with individuals.

Backgrounds, different cultures, different diversities, you know, things like that. It helped me be mindful of how to be caring, you know, nurturing, loving. So that's one thing that I just want people to understand: that being in a program like that, it'll wake you up in a way. (Joaquin)



Photo: Craig O'Neal

SOCIAL SUPPORT/RELATIONSHIPS:

- Carlos & Keanu. Carlos identifies as Mexican-American, and Keanu as Filipino. They served 25 and 27 years respectively, began the PDP at the same time, and were teamed up for 2 years before separate release dates. Now they are close friends and regularly attend baseball games together.
- Kahn, developed pro-social friendships after learning to build them during PDP:
“It’s a funny thing, I learned that when I really stepped out of my own self, I’m a very likeable person. I have a lot of non-Asian friends that really like me and they actually look up to me. And so, I started to have a lot of friends, I mean most of the guys from the dog program when I was in there . . . They are very good, supportive for me.”

Final Thoughts

- ▶ Participant had to understand dog, while also working with humans. There is a deepening investment in and attachment to the dog, which seeps into human interactions: increased understanding and compassion instead of judgment, self-reflection instead of self-absorption, and common goals and communication instead of self-preservation and isolation.
- ▶ Participants learned to tap into empathetic responses in understanding their dogs, come to know each other in the program on a deeper level.
- ▶ Participants to see all beings fully, while also coming to appreciate their own value as human beings.



Photo: Craig O'Neal



Craig O'Neal

// CRAIG O'NEAL

Jason & Sugar
Mama
TAILS
Sugar Mama
adopted by Jason
after his release
from prison

The PDP became the space through which inner shifts were received, processed and activated. All participants identified the PDP as vital to their inner change.

This finds the most profound support in their current lives, having successfully reentered society.

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