

The Experiences of Offenders in a Prison Canine Program

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IT IS VERY popular to keep animals as pets, but practitioners in various helping professions, including social work, are beginning to recognize the benefits of using animals in their practices. It is no longer uncommon to find resident pets at nursing homes or mental health facilities. A growing number of correctional facilities are also recognizing the value of animal programs. Prisons and juvenile detention centers across the United States have begun implementing dog-training programs in which offenders within the facilities train dogs for a variety of service positions.

One of these programs is the Indiana Canine Assistant and Adolescent Network (ICAAN). This non-profit organization that trains and places service animals was founded in Indianapolis in 2001 by Dr. Sally Irvin. It began at a juvenile correctional facility, and it has since expanded to several correctional facilities involving males and females, both adolescent and adult. One of these facilities is a medium security facility for adult males. The program at this location was started in 2003 and currently involves six dogs and six trainers. The dogs are trained to complete a wide variety of tasks that can help to assist people with activities of daily living. When the dogs graduate from the program, they are placed with children who have physical disabilities.

This qualitative research study explores the experiences of the offenders who are involved in the ICAAN program at this prison. Through in-depth interviews with each of the program participants, the researcher was able to gain insight into the ICAAN program through the experiences of the prison inmates.

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Literature Review

The human-animal bond is a well-documented phenomenon that has been around since humans began domesticating animals. Animals were raised to be workers, food, and also companions. The strength of the human-animal bond allowed companion animals to quickly adopt roles as members of the family. This is evidenced by the growing industry of pet products currently available. Beyond the basics of food and medical supplies, this industry has grown to include clothing and recreation for pets (Levinson & Mallon, 1997).

However, animals are not the only ones who benefit from the human-animal bond. This bond can have both physical and emotional benefits for people (Friedman, 1995). Research has indicated a variety of positive outcomes from the use of animals. For example, their use in therapy can decrease depression (Haynes, 1991), and petting a companion animal can lower one's blood pressure (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983; Levitt, 1988).

Research has shown that cardiac patients who own pets have a higher survival rate than those patients who are not pet owners (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch & Thomas, 1980). This is one of the numerous benefits companion animals can provide for the elderly (Levitt, 1988). The elderly also benefit from the companionship that a pet can provide. Many elderly persons are socially isolated, and the animal is often the only friend or companion with whom the elderly person maintains regular contact (Nieburg, 1984).

Children also place great value on their relationships with animals. Research suggests that companion animals can be very beneficial to self-care children, as the animals provide companionship and security (Heath & McKenry, 1989).

The current practice of Animal-Assisted Therapy stems from the techniques of pet therapy that Boris Levinson developed in the 1960s, but the therapeutic use of animals can be traced as far back as 1792 at the York Retreat in England (Hooker, Freeman, & Stewart, 2002). In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of animal programs within prisons. This is because these low-cost programs are believed to provide positive benefits to inmates and possibly reduce recidivism rates (Strimple, 2003).

One of these animal programs was developed at the Joseph Harp Correctional Center, a medium security prison in Oklahoma. This institution developed a therapeutic program that paired dogs with depressed inmates. Not only did the program decrease depression among those inmates, but the rates of aggression decreased among the inmates as well (Haynes, 1991).

More recently, the Kit Carson Correctional Center, a medium security prison in Colorado, has also developed a service dog training program. Evaluation of this new program has indicated enhanced morale for both inmates and staff at the institution. In addition, there have been many positive changes among the individuals who serve as dog trainers, including a decrease in high blood pressure and anxiety (Osborne & Bair, 2003).

A military prison at Ft. Knox has a dog training program in which twelve inmates are volunteer dog trainers. Staff involved with that program state that participation as a dog trainer teaches the inmates patience. They also believe that programs such as this help the inmates to increase self-esteem (Hasenauer, 1998).

An evaluation of the canine program at Nova Institution for Women in Canada found that participants in the program had scores on depression that were lower than scores for inmates who were not part of the program. In addition, the program participants scored significantly lower on the UCLA Loneliness Scale than did non-participants (Richardson-Taylor & Blanchette, 2001).

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Methods & Analysis

Although dog training programs exist within prisons throughout the United States, there is very little academic research to actually document the benefits that these programs have for the offenders. Much of what is known about these programs comes from anecdotal accounts from staff within the institutions. One of the goals of this exploratory study was to gain insight and understanding into the offenders' experiences of participating in the dog training program. Because of the small sample size, this is best accomplished by adopting a qualitative methodology, using in-depth interviews as the primary means for data collection. This methodology allows the researcher to capture more depth and detail of the offenders' experiences. Interviews are one of the most frequently used qualitative methods of data

collection (with interviews defined as “conversations with a purpose” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)). This technique allows the researcher to gain broad insight into the subject’s reality.

Participants

Due to the small number of offenders participating in the dog training program, it was important to the researcher to involve as many of them as possible in this research study. Therefore, all dog trainers were invited to participate in the research. After the researcher had been granted all IRB approvals, staff at the prison introduced the research project to the inmates. All of the dog trainers volunteered to be interviewed.

The six participants, whose names have been changed to protect confidentiality, were: Chris, a young man who describes himself as an addict who was arrested due to drugs; Kevin, who has a college degree and claims that “greed” was his downfall, as he was arrested for check fraud; Rollin, the only African-American man in the ICAAN program, who claims that prior to prison he was immature and unable to keep a job; Renny, a recovering alcoholic and one of the original dog trainers in the program, who was preparing to be released the day after the interview; Sam, who recently joined the program, and states he had a drug problem prior to his arrest; and Aldis, who has been incarcerated since 1997, and also has a history of drugs.

Data Collection

The interviews were unstructured, with just three guiding questions: 1) What is the experience for the offender participating in the canine program?; 2) What benefits does the offender believe he has gained through this participation?; 3) How has the experience of participating in the ICAAN program affected the offender? Other questions were asked as warranted within each interview.

Each of the interviews was conducted at the correctional facility and was audiotape recorded. Audiotaped interviews allow the researcher to attend to the respondent during the interview (Weiss, 1994). These audiotapes were then transcribed to be used for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to organize the massive amount of data that has typically been collected in order to locate themes and interpretations. The analysis of the data in this study involved reviewing the transcripts to find common themes. The researcher used a technique known as cross-case analysis to uncover the themes within the data (Patton, 1990). The researcher used a data reduction technique called Code-and-Retrieve which involves labeling segments of the data based on content (Richards & Richards, 1994). The data was coded by both identifying concrete content within the transcripts that followed the themes, and by interpreting the meaning of content which also fit within a theme (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996).

In order to improve the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the researcher utilized a technique known as peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the researcher had identified themes within the data, a colleague not involved in the research read the transcripts and also noted themes. These were then compared to the themes found by the researcher. The peer debriefer noted themes very similar to those developed by the researcher.

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Findings

The following themes were found: 1) Patience; 2) Parenting Skills; 3) Helping Others; 4) Increased Self-Esteem; 5) Social Skills; 6) Normalizing Effect; 7) Calming Effect on the Environment.

Patience

The first theme identified among the data was the theme of patience. The offenders all stated that being part of the ICAAN program taught them to be more patient. One inmate makes the case that patience is something that most offenders lack. Sam stated, "I guess everybody in here, in the prison system, has always had that mentality 'I want what I want when I want it now.'" One inmate, Kevin, stated,

One of the biggest attributes, I guess, this program brings to us is the development of patience. Even though I am a father, patience is something that I think all of us lack to an extent. Having to deal with the dog, primarily when they were puppies, dealing with the dog from six in the morning until nine at night... just dealing with everything that comes along, with the training aspect... Patience would probably be the biggest virtue.

Although patience is a skill that was developed by working with dogs, it can be transferred to interactions with people, as well. One inmate described how he had developed patience with other inmates who had so many questions for him regarding the dog he was training. Rollin stated,

I had to answer twenty thousand questions, the same ones over and over and, you know, it taught me to be more patient... I taught myself to stop and be sociable and explain to them, even if it was the thousandth time that I had said it that day, and to realize it's not about me and what I'm doing. It's what I'm doing for someone else.

Parenting Skills

Patience may also relate to the second theme, which involves the parenting skills of the offenders. All six of the inmates in the ICAAN program have children, and they mentioned how participating in the program will help them to re-establish relationships with their children and be better parents. Many of them explained that the program has taught them responsibility, and that lesson will carry over into their roles as fathers.

One dog trainer, Kevin, stated, It's similar to raising a child, the time and the care that's involved. Even though they're just a dog, you put a lot of care and a lot of love and just a lot of time. It definitely instills a sense of responsibility. I think that's something that probably all of us need.

He goes on to explain,

Again the responsibility and the compassion and the love and the caring obviously were probably some qualities that I lacked as a father, for me to make the mistakes that I did because I was thinking more of myself than of my family and my children. So being able to develop those type of parenting skills is definitely a plus.

Rollin believes that some of the skills he learned in training the dogs, may also be applicable to helping his two children who have autism.

One way I looked at the dog training, and I hate to say this, the OC, operant conditioning, stuff how you train dogs to do things, and I was thinking maybe I might be able to apply that to teaching my children, you know, my two children how to do different things... they're autistic and one of the main things that it does, it just presents a major language barrier, you know and with the dog you realize that when you say sit to the dog, the dog doesn't know what "sit" means. They recognize the cue, they recognize the sound, but

they don't know the definition of sit or stand... and I was thinking maybe I could train my children, my autistic children, to maybe further their communication, how to do different things.

Rollin also plans to utilize the skills he learned in dog training to train a dog for his five children. He stated,

Actually it's ironic that I got chose for the dog program because right before I got chose my kids came up, and I hadn't mentioned anything about it to them, and they said, "Daddy, we want a puppy." I figured if I get my kids a dog, I might as well know how to train the dog.

Rollin believes that he might be able to train the dog to assist his two autistic children, "It'd be therapeutic. It might bring 'em out of their autism, might bring out a different side of 'em."

Another inmate, Aldis, also said he will use the skills to train a family pet for his children, "I'll probably take the skills I've learned in the dog program and possibly, ya' know, teach my boys and my little girl how to train a dog. We'll train one together. That way they'll learn."

The trainers also explained that their children have been able to meet the dogs when they have visited. This helps to ease some of the anxiety of being in a prison environment, and makes the children more willing to visit.

Helping Others

A major component of what the inmates like in the ICAAN program is the fact that they are helping someone else. One of the trainers, Aldis, stated, "The main thing I like is because what it (ICAAN) stands for and what we're doing with the dogs... they're gonna go to a child hopefully." Kevin articulated this theme when he stated,

I think when we all initially start, we really don't understand the actual concept. We know that we're gonna be training dogs for handicapped children. But we don't know the significance of that and we don't know how rewarding and gratifying that really is... we were able to watch many videos that Dr. Irvin had brought down showing the interaction between a graduated dog and a client... just watching the video, the introduction of those two, and the smile and happiness on her face. I think, if nothing else were to happen between now and the time that I go home, that was gratifying enough for me to think that I am doing something beneficial to help someone... It's just really a pleasure to know that even though I'm incarcerated, I'm still able to participate and I guess even serve the community. That's very gratifying.

Several of the men in the ICAAN program identify personally with the goals of the program because they have disabled persons in their own families. As mentioned, Rollin has two children with autism, and he appreciated the opportunity that ICAAN gives him to help other disabled children. Sam also tells of his family's special needs.

I got a handicap brother... I'd love to see somebody do this for him... the only thing that really makes this (the hard work) worth it in the end is that I know when I get done I will have paid my debt to society forever, and I will learn a lot of things about myself through the program.

Another inmate, Chris, related personally as well to the ICAAN program because he has an uncle who is disabled. He described how he first became involved in ICAAN because he thought it would be fun to interact with the dogs, but after realizing that the program was to help persons with disabilities, he liked the program even more.

Renny stated that it was the opportunity to do something for others that first attracted him to the ICAAN program. He states,

This was an opportunity for me to do something for someone else, because before everything was about me, and I realized after being incarcerated that, as part of my recovery, that I needed to start helping other people and I figured that this was the perfect opportunity to do so.

Renny's dog was one of the first to graduate the program and be placed with someone. Although it was difficult for Renny to see the dog go, he stated that he was able to see a video of the dog with its new owner. He described his reaction,

Just to see the expression on that lady's face, how happy she was, has made it all worth while. That's probably the most selfless thing that I've ever done in my life. And to see how happy that lady was, ya' know, the icing on the cake for me.

The opportunity to help others has given meaning to the lives of these incarcerated men. They seem to be trying to demonstrate how they have changed and to regain society's respect. This is, in part, because they now have respect for themselves.

Self-Esteem

With 1400 inmates at the prison, the selection of ICAAN trainers is quite competitive. To be selected is an honor and a privilege that the current participants take pride in and helps to improve their self-esteem.

Chris describes the pride he felt when he was selected, "It made me feel real good inside that they were actually lookin' at me like that." Kevin also was pleased to be picked,

I was very elated. It was really rewarding just initially to know that, at that time there were only four of us, and to know that I was chosen. It was a huge responsibility I knew I was taking on, but I was really looking forward to it.

Renny also described his feelings about being chosen, "That made me feel great. It helped me feel a lot better about myself immediately. That was just the beginning... I had no idea I'd learn all the things I did about myself and other people... but mainly about myself."

Aldis never believed that he would be selected. He recalls a conversation he had with another inmate regarding the process, "they don't pick people like me, that's what I was telling him. I guess I was being a little bit hard on myself." Later when he discovered he had been chosen, he states, "I was kind of shocked, you know. I mean, I was tickled to be picked you know. I don't know, I'm not gonna say flattered, but I was tickled to be picked."

The additional responsibilities and privileges that are granted to the dog trainers also help to build self-esteem in the men. Renny had a history of violent relationships with women. He believes that he tried to control women, because his own life was so out of control. Through the ICAAN program, he has gained self-respect and states, "To be honest with you, I'd rather be by myself than be that way again, because nobody deserves that, and I don't need to do that to myself anymore." His increased self-esteem is also apparent when he says,

To have more control of myself is a good feeling because I know I don't have to react that way, like I used to. The past is what it is, and it's up to me to make what I want out of my future, regardless of what's happening... I'm what I make of it.

The increase in self-esteem also improves the inmates' willingness to engage with others. This willingness ties closely with the following theme of improved social skills.

Social Skills

The inmates each described how the ICAAN program helped them to improve their social skills. Chris explained how he has changed from the program, "I wasn't very social at first. That's kinda helped me out a lot, too. Now I like to sit there and talk to people. Now it's a lot easier."

Other inmates also noted improvements in their abilities to relate to others. Kevin says, "It furthers your whole, your people skills, your responsibility and your communication, and compassion and things like that. I think ICAAN is a program that benefits the offender and the recipient and the community at the same time."

Rollin also noted that he learned better communication skills in the program, "I've learned communication first of all. You have to be able to clearly communicate with the dog."

Renny talked of how he began interacting more with others as a result of the ICAAN program.

I would just do my own thing, and, you know, be sorta isolated and just keep to myself and wouldn't socialize with anyone, and then being' in the dog program and having a dog and it being new, I was in the spotlight so to speak and it put me in front of everybody and I wanted to do a good job...

Aldis reflected on how after spending many years at another institution, he was isolating himself and becoming very withdrawn. He states that prior to being arrested,

I had pretty good communication skills, but when I first got locked up, the time that I had and stuff like that just took part away from inside. I just, 'ya know, stayed locked in the cells... I think I was starting to get institutionalized... I was lucky to be able to sit here and talk to you like this. You know, I would turn everything down, not trying to be mean, but I just didn't have no communication skills...

Some inmates noted how the ICAAN program is a team approach and has helped them learn how to work with others. Kevin stated,

This is definitely a team concept. I don't believe any of us feel that we're competing against one another. We want to try to graduate as many dogs as possible... we work together and do our best to make the program a success and not us as individuals.

Rollin also claims that he has learned the concept of teamwork. "...sometimes we have to work together to train the dogs. We've done a lot of group training here... I was already a team worker and stuff, but sometimes new experiences and new opportunities help reinforce things that we already know."

Normalizing Effect

Another positive effect that the ICAAN program has is that it normalizes the institutional setting of the prison and reminds the offenders of home. When asked about his favorite part of the ICAAN program, Chris responded, "Being with the dogs. Being able to get away from the crowd up in the dorm and getting off by your self, just playing Frisbee with the dog, or working with them." Aldis described it as, "one of the only things that's from the streets that we actually can get in here and, ya' know, play with us and stuff."

Being a dog trainer provides the inmates with additional privileges and time away from the other

inmates, as they often need to be walking or working with the dog. Renny explains the benefit of these privileges, "Being able to walk around, because being in prison is all about controlled movement and then knowing where you're at, at all times... and being in the program, it gives you a sense of freedom, so to speak."

Kevin describes how unique it is for the offenders to have that freedom. "This is a position of which is unlike any here at the facility. You have very limited supervision. There's a lot of trust instilled in you, and you really have to live up to that."

Kevin said that other inmates at the prison also benefit from the dogs' presence. He asserts,

We have guys that have transferred from different facilities and some of them have been incarcerated for 15 or 20 years and seeing a dog, even though they're not really considered pets, that's the closest thing to home that they've seen in years. Being able to spend five or ten minutes of their day, getting on the floor and playing with a dog is, that's the highlight of their day.

Kevin also compared the setting at this prison with other facilities he had been to, noting that there is more green space and "really the only other dogs that I had seen were facility dogs for drug detection. So that was different."

Sam, who states he was quite bitter after being incarcerated, describes how the dog brought joy back in his life. When asked what he learned in the program, he stated,

This kind of sounds kind of corny or whatever, but I think how to love again... when I came in here my family was stripped away, all my possessions, everything, I mean, you know, everything... this is the first time since I got arrested that I've been smiling and havin' a good time.

Calming Effect on the Environment

The dog trainers are not the only ones who are gaining joy from the presence of the dogs. The participants in the ICAAN program indicated that the dogs have made an impact on the whole prison environment. The inmates are housed in large rooms they call dorms, rather than individual cells. All of the dog trainers reside in two of the dorms, and they have noted a change in each of those dorms since the arrival of the dogs. Kevin said, "The stress levels in the dorm decreased; conduct reports decreased. They kind of did an initial study over the first six to eight months and everything that was negative tends to decrease with the influx of the dogs coming in."

Chris describes the difference he has noticed:

Go to a dorm that ain't, that don't, have dogs in it's got more tension in it. And if you go into a dorm that's got the dogs in it... it ain't got very much tension. It's very laid back. Everybody's thinkin' they're at home or something... it's a lot easier atmosphere to live in having the dogs around than not havin' the dogs. It takes a lot of the tension off.

Rollin also believes that the dogs make a difference in the environment. "It helps a little bit with the morale. It eases stress a lot, too, with a lot of the offenders... they can play with the dog or they can just pet the dog. It's almost like it's therapeutic in a way."

Renny told of the positive effect the dogs had on his dorm, "We had that incentive where what dorm got the least amount of write ups at one time, and I think we won like three times in a row... the dogs had a more calm, soothing effect for everybody in the dorm." He even suggested moving inmates so that there are dogs in each dorm, rather than keeping the dogs in just two

dorms. "It helps ease the tension between everybody because this is a stressful environment, I don't care what anybody says."

Aldis also cited the positive effects on the environment,

It has changed this place a lot. A lot of people's, I'm not gonna say soft, but they're softer than what they was, ya' know. They let their feelings come out, lay down, play with the dogs, ya' know, talk real feminine to 'em and stuff like that... It changed D dorm a lot, 'cause I was around D dorm before the dogs actually come in here and there was more fights and, 'ya know, a lot more aggressive stuff going on up there. Now you don't really see too much of that. It's like they just go over and pet the dog or something. Their whole attitude changes pretty much.

That statement seems to hold true for all of the inmates involved in ICAAN. Each trainer described how his involvement in the program made significant changes in his life.

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Discussion and Conclusions

The data collected in this qualitative study suggests that the ICAAN program has positive effects on the rehabilitation of the offenders within the program. One of the most significant findings was that the men recognized improvements in self-esteem after participating in the program. This is probably due in part to the increased responsibilities they have been given and the trust that has been instilled in them from the prison staff. This is encouraging since prior research on prisons has indicated that a disproportionate number of inmates have low self-esteem (Castellano & Soderstrom, 1997). The self image of the men in the ICAAN program also benefits from the sense of accomplishment they receive when training a dog. This finding also corresponds with other research that has indicated there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and attachment to a companion animal (Triebenbacher, 1998).

The inmates also reported improved social skills from participating in ICAAN. Research indicates that programs that improve social skills have lower recidivism rates (Vacca, 2004). The improved social skills are probably complementary to the increase in self-esteem the inmates reported. As the social skills improve, they boost the offender's self-confidence; and the more confident the offender is, the more likely he is to socialize. The combination of these two program benefits could have a significant impact on the recidivism rates of the participants.

The increases in self-esteem and the improved skills in communication and patience are likely to have an effect on each inmate's life outside of prison. Offenders consistently have issues with anger and aggression, and patience is a characteristic that can counter those issues (Vannoy & Hoyt, 2004). Because this facility is a medium security prison, most of the inmates there are serving the last few years of their sentences and will likely be released within five years. Thus, an important part of the ICAAN program is rehabilitating prisoners to return to their communities.

Nationally, recidivism rates are approximately 60 percent. A dog training program in Wisconsin has had 68 inmates released who were dog trainers, and none of them have returned to prison (Strimple, 2003). When the inmates were asked about the possibility of re-offending, they did not believe that any of the dog trainers would return. Kevin best expressed it when he said, "I don't expect any of us that are involved now to come back, partly due to the program. Because it has given us many opportunities and it's given us some marketable skills."

A surprising find in this research was that the inmates derived such pleasure from knowing that their work was helping others. Research on rehabilitation suggests that anti-social orientations and self-centeredness are common characteristics among incarcerated individuals (Eisenman, 1993, Walters, 2003). The findings in this study demonstrate that the offenders have developed

compassion for others, which is a beneficial trait in keeping the inmate from re-offending after release. In addition, the opportunity to help others has given meaning and purpose to the inmate's life in prison.

Not only have the individuals benefited from the ICAAN program, but this research suggests that the program has a positive impact on the prison environment. The decrease in aggression reported by the participants directly reflects what the literature in this area has suggested (Harkrader, Burke, & Owen, 2004; Haynes, 1991).

In addition, the normalizing effect that the dogs have on the environment is important. When individuals are kept away from society, they can become institutionalized. As the one participant expressed, he had become very withdrawn and bitter after spending so much time in an institution. That would have made it very difficult for him to then transition back into society following his release. The dogs provide an important link to the world outside of prison. They are a source of comfort and affection that is otherwise nonexistent in an inmate's world.

Some would argue that a person in prison does not deserve comfort or affection, and that he is being punished. However, in a medium security prison such as this one where the offenders are going to be released in the near future, it seems to be more cost-effective to rehabilitate, rather than simply punish. The time in prison can be used to address the issues that put the inmate in prison initially and thus prevent him from concern for others, low self-esteem, lack of patience, and poor social skills, then canine programs such as ICAAN would be effective vehicles for rehabilitation.

There are some obvious limits to this study. The offenders in the canine program were selected carefully among many applicants. This is not a program for all offenders, and administrators of the program screened out applicants who they believed would take advantage of the additional privileges given to dog trainers. Another limitation is the small sample size. There were only six men who were interviewed; however, the data collection had reached a point of saturation even with just six. Because the methodology was qualitative and exploratory, it is not the author's intent to make broad generalizations based on this data. Instead, this data should be used to provide direction for future research in this area.

There is a need for quantitative research that evaluates all of the programs similar to this one. When embarking upon this project, the researcher could not find enough evaluation data specific to canine programs to develop hypotheses for testing. This led to the researcher's decision to use an exploratory design which could then be developed into hypotheses. Based on the hypotheses that have been generated by this qualitative evaluation, the researcher intends to develop quantitative measurement instruments that can be used to evaluate other programs. These instruments will measure the patience, parenting skills, altruism, self-esteem, and social skills of the inmate trainers, possibly using a pre and post design to measure the amount of change.

Future quantitative research can possibly provide concrete evidence of the positive effects of canine prison programs. This evidence can be used by the current programs to justify their continuation, to seek additional funding, and to expand the scope of the programs. Other prisons may also use the research in the development of new canine programs within their institutions.

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