

Dog training programmes in prison

Using prison inmates to deliver obedience training to dogs.

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| Effect scale | Quality of evidence | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| | Effect Impact on crime | Mechanism How it works | Moderator Where it works | Implementation How to do it | Economic cost What it costs |
|  Overall reduction |  Moderate |  Moderate | No information |  Low | No information |

Focus of the intervention

Dog training programmes (DTPs) require offenders to train dogs for service purposes (for example, guide dogs or therapy dogs) or teach basic commands to shelter dogs to increase their chances of being adopted. The review investigates whether DTPs reduce reoffending, anti-social behaviour and drug and alcohol use, and increase self-control, self-esteem and overall mental health and wellbeing.

The narrative is primarily based on one meta-analytic review covering seven studies. These studies include crime-related outcomes such as:

- reoffending
- aggression
- offending while in prison
- self-control
- alcohol and drug use

A second meta-analytic review provided additional evidence in relation to non-crime related outcomes such as mental health, wellbeing and emotional intelligence.

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that the intervention has reduced crime.

The specific crime outcomes were:

- reoffending and reconviction rate
- aggression
- alcohol and drug use
- offences committed while in prison

The meta-analysis found that DTPs led to a reduction in recidivism and reconviction rates in prisoners compared to those who had not participated in DTP.

The review reported a 36% difference in reoffending rates in the treatment group compared to the control group (68% reconvicted in a control group compared with 32% reconvicted in a treated group). Of the four primary studies that specifically examined reoffending, all showed a positive crime reduction effect, although only two were statistically significant.

The findings also suggest that self-esteem, wellbeing and self-efficacy are increased when participating in DTPs. These outcomes are similar to those found with more traditional programmes such as education, employment and training programmes. However, more robust evaluations of DTPs should be conducted to confirm these findings.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The review suggested a number of mechanisms by which dog training programmes in prisons might have an effect on crime.

These include:

- inmates having to stay trouble free to be in the programme
- inmates learning patience with the dog which assists them to remain trouble-free

- participants feeling empowered to achieve goals
- increased empathy for dogs (and subsequently humans) making it easier to bond with people and increasing emotional intelligence and coping skills

However none of these mechanisms were tested within the review.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review did not examine under what conditions or for what population groups the intervention might work best.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review gave some account of how the intervention could be implemented but implementation challenges were not discussed. Most programmes require offenders to be free of behaviour-related infringements for a specified period before admittance to the programme as well as continued good behaviour throughout the programme.

Programmes can vary in numbers of participants, criteria for participation, length of participation, and amount of time per day that the participants spend with the dogs. Many also include a vocational component.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not mention the costs or benefits of DTPs and no formal economic analysis was provided.

Background literature did highlight that training dogs in prisons is cheaper than dog training outside of prisons (\$4,000 when trained by prisoners, whereas it costs \$10,000-\$12,000 to train dogs outside of prison). However, the cost/benefit analysis was not specifically focused on in the main review.

General considerations

- The review of qualitative DTP outcomes has highlighted benefits to participants, the correctional facility and the community.
- Quantitative literature has also covered desirable effects on psychosocial and behavioural factors. However, small sample sizes, differences in the ways DTPs are conducted in primary studies and lack of randomisation into treatment and control groups make them less comparable.
- The majority of the evidence is based in the USA so caution should be taken when applying to other geographical contexts.
- Only two studies contained treatment-control groups, and so future research should aim to focus on more comparable methods of analysing the effects of DTPs.

Summary

There is some evidence that DTPs reduce reoffending overall and have desired effects on the psychological outcomes of offenders.

Attitudes of offenders additionally seem to improve with a reduction in aggression when participating in DTPs. The psychosocial outcomes such as increased self-esteem, empathy and accountability may act as mechanisms to the effectiveness of this intervention.

The review does not consider potential biases with the methods of analysis for individual studies but does consider other biases (for example, selection bias). There are limitations in comparability of the different ways DTPs are conducted in the primary studies. No economic considerations of DTPs as a method of crime reduction are covered.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

Cooke B J, and Farrington D P. (2016); The Effectiveness of Dog-Training Programs in Prison: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Literature. *Prison Journal*, 96(6), pp.854-876

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