

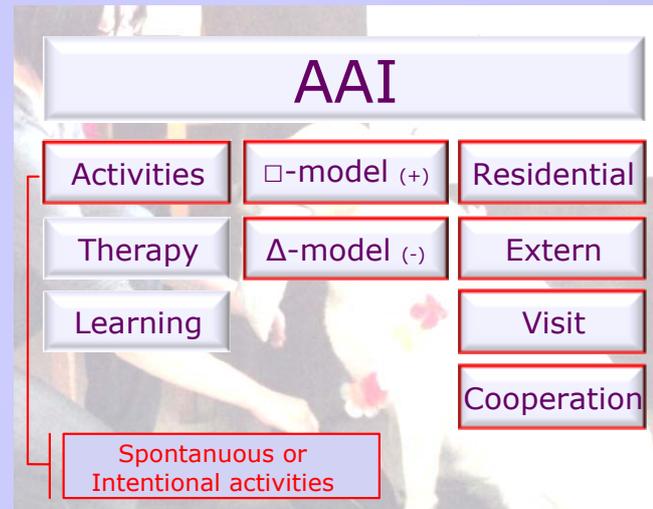
Is it wise to involve animals in prisons and rehabilitation programs? A study conducted in Flanders (Belgium)

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INTRODUCTION

- Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) involve animals in activities (AAA), therapy (AAT), learning (AAL) to promote well-being of clients (Samuels et al., 2006)
 - AAT denotes that a therapist sets client oriented, therapeutic goals and progress records are kept
 - AAA are programs without specific goals
 - AAL includes a teacher and individual educational goals for each student
- For about 25 years, prisons in the United States and South-Africa implement animals in AAI rehabilitation programs
- Previous studies have found both positive effects and evidence for a link between animal abuse and violent behaviour towards humans



- Goals of current study:** (1) gather information on AAI-programs for offenders in Flanders
(2) identify eventual welfare problems of the animals involved

MATERIALS AND METHODS

- Respondents: Flanders (Belgium) counts 32 facilities for offenders: 15 prisons and 17 rehabilitation centres.
- A semi-structured, telephone-survey was conducted to gather information about: facilities and respondents, AAI programs per se, education of AAI practitioners, and the animals employed in AAI.

RESULTS

Twenty-nine (91%) of all facilities replied to our survey. Of these, twenty-three (79%) facilities offer animal-assisted interventions (AAIs). Institutions either work with shelter animals (17%) or have residential animals (83%). The latter include farm animals (56%), parrots (19%), cats (8%), dogs (6%), fishes (6%), turtles (2%), or gerbils (2%). Only two of the AAI programmes exclude prisoners with psychotic problems or those showing aggression towards the animals. One program included only offenders with severe psychiatric diseases. AAI goals differed widely and included: learning to show affection, breaking down psychological barriers, facilitating social contact, developing working skills, developing a daily work rhythm, facilitating social skills, etc. All programs focussed solely on the prisoners and none kept systematic records on the animals. Nevertheless, six (25%) facilities reported anecdotally that there were occasional negative impacts to the animals: management problems, negligence with feeding procedures, breeding without permission of the guards, bite accidents involving rabbits and dogs, stress signals, hiding and running away from prisoners, etc.

Conclusion: current results constitute a source of concern and warrant further investigation.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

W.E. Samuels, D. Coultis, L. Meers, S. Normando, and F.O. Ödberg. Can an AAI programme improve animal welfare? Proceedings of the VDWE International Congress on Companion Animal Behaviour and Welfare. 119-128, 2006.