

## *Animals behind bars, a study on rehabilitation programs involving animals in Italian prisons*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

- Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) involve animals in activities (aAA), therapy (AAT), education & learning (AAE/L) to promote well-being of clients (Samuels et al., 2006)
- 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



### **THIS STUDY**

- (1) Gathered information on AAI programs for offenders in Italian correctional facilities
- (2) Identified possible welfare concerns of the animals involved



### **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

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.

Respondents: Two hundred and seven (93%) out of 223 facilities were contacted; 74 (36%) completed a 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.

### **RESULTS**

**AAIs:** sixty-four facilities (86%) reported having regulations about the presence of animals and 19 facilities (26%) offer at least one AAI program (totalling 31 AAIs).

**Animals involved:** 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.

**Training of the animals:** none of the animals were trained for AAIs.

**The procedures and goals:** strong differences between AAIs. At 2 facilities, animals worked in AATs guided by psychotherapists assisted by animal handlers and volunteers. Two AAIs 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.

**Training of the practitioners:** none of the practitioners received AAI training.

**Exclusion criteria:** Two facilities have exclusion criteria for sex offenders or offenders under maximum security

**Welfare:** two facilities reported possible negative effects such as problems with animal management, housing conditions, and hygiene from animal contact.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

*Results indicate a large amount of improvisation. Practitioners should be more aware of the importance of competent training and of systematically monitoring and ensuring welfare in AAIs.*

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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.