The Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Research Volume 8, 2019

Edited by
Steven Kohm, Kevin Walby,
Kelly Gorkoff, and Katharina Maier
The University of Winnipeg
Centre for Interdisciplinary Justice Studies (CIJS)
ISSN 1925-2420

Prisoners Accessing Relational Connections with Dogs: A Just Outcome of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* at Stony Mountain Institution

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Abstract

Prisoner mental health is a serious concern across the globe, and increasing inmates' access to relational connections with domestic animals is a unique and emerging response. This article presents the just outcome of an evaluation of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* at a medium-security federal correctional institution in Canada. Interviews were held with a purposive sample of 10 therapy dog program participants, 3 therapy dog handlers and the institutional program coordinator. We found that the therapy dogs were perceived to offer a form of love and support to the participants, achieving the objectives of the therapy dog program in an environment where

[1] Acknowledgements: We would like to acknowledge the Manitoba St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program volunteer teams and Director of Community Services, Teresa Toutant, and Stony Mountain Institution, in particular Deputy Warden Janalee Bell-Boychuk, for supporting this study, and the program participants for taking part in it. We would also like to acknowledge Alicia Husband for conducting the handler interviews, locating and accessing articles and formatting the paper. This research was financially supported by the Office of the Centennial Enhancement Chair in One Health and Wellness at the University of Saskatchewan.

access to relational connections with dogs is denied. This denial is posited as unjust because other-than-human relationships can be significant to some individuals' mental health. Love was experienced by the inmates as an effortless and reciprocal closeness with the therapy dogs and with no external expectations. Support was experienced by the participants as trustworthy communication, meaningful motivation and a sense of grounding, all difficult to achieve while incarcerated. We found that the relational connections between the participants and therapy dogs benefitted the inmates' mental health, and offered insight on addressing two challenges commonly faced by correctional institutions: mandatory programming and hypermasculinity.

Key words: animal-assisted activity, relational connections, therapy dog, mental health

Introduction

Imprisonment is a form of punishment in which individuals are deprived their freedom. Prison for many is an isolating environment, with inmates[2] experiencing physical, mental, emotional and, for some, spiritual disconnection from their community and family supports (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joset, 2004; Doob, Webster, & Gartner, 2014; Rodriguez, 2016). For a large proportion of inmates, supportive connections are limited prior to incarceration given their high rates of adverse childhood experiences and encounters of inequities as adults (Dutton & Hart, 1992; Friestad, Ase-Bente, & Kjelsberg, 2014; Harlow, 1999). Inmates' connections often get further strained because of the realities and stigma associated with incarceration (Coles-Kemp, n.d.; Dear et al., 2002; Ricciardelli & Clow, 2016). Inmates themselves also initiate disconnection, frequently isolating themselves from outside networks and available

[2] We use the term "program participant" in this paper as often as feasible. We also frequently use the term "inmate" instead of "prisoner." We chose this as the preferred term simply because we also use the word prison, and together the two terms can read as repetitive.

supports as a form of self-defence and in response to their institutionalization/prisonization (Bates, 2018). For example, some inmates identify moral disengagement (i.e., inhumane conduct) as one coping strategy within the prison environment (South & Wood, 2006).

Approximately 15,000 individuals are presently incarcerated for two years plus a day in federal institutions in Canada, at a rate of 51 inmates per 100,000 adult population (Reitano, 2017). In fiscal year 2015–2016, 23 percent of inmates were serving a sentence between two years and three years less a day, 23 percent were serving a life sentence, and the remainder had sentences in between (Correctional Service Canada [CSC], 2017a). Concern over the mental health of prisoners has a longstanding history in North America, with significant attention to the detrimental impacts of incarceration (Bukstel & Kilmann, 1980; Haney, 2001; Porporino & Zamble, 1984). This includes the potential for increased loneliness, experiencing and inciting violence, disoriented self-identity, poor physical health, psychological deterioration, reintegration challenges, conflicting values, increased frustration, social and individual isolation, increased stigma, traumatization, increased depression, anxiety and stress, amplified fear, self-harming behaviours, reduced ability for survival/coping, mistrust, diminished connections to the outside, and distress (Hemmens & Marquart, 1999; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Nurse, Woodcock, & Ormsby, 2003; Porporino & Zamble, 1984; Ricciardelli, 2014a).

Haney shared in 2001 that "few people are completely unchanged or unscathed by the experience [of incarceration]. At the very least, prison is painful, and incarcerated persons often suffer long-term consequences from having been subjected to pain, deprivation, and extremely atypical patterns and norms of living and interacting with others" (pp. 4–5). A 2015 review of the literature concluded there continues to be a need for greater attention to how prisoner mental health is impacted by the prison environment (Goomany & Dickinson, 2015). In October 2018, Bill C-83 was introduced into

Canadian parliament to eliminate the practice of inmate segregation in federal prisons, which is well-established to be damaging to inmate well-being (Haney, 2003). Critics of this bill say it does not go far enough, while others have continued to raise concern over the deteriorating conditions of confinement generally and that the pains of imprisonment overall prevent inmates from forming positive relationships while incarcerated (e.g., Crewe, 2011; Ricciardelli, 2014b). Under the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act,* inmate health care is the responsibility of Correctional Service Canada (CSC). *The* 2017 Canadian annual report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator makes reference to CSC's enduring priority of offering "effective and timely interventions in addressing mental health needs of offenders" (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2017).

An emerging and unique way in which connection to self and others, and in turn mental health, may be improved for some inmates is through the introduction of an animal-assisted intervention (AAI). AAI is a term "commonly used to describe the utilization of various species of animals in diverse manners beneficial to humans" (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA], 2018a, para. 4). There are numerous AAI programs in prisons in the United States, and several in Canada and in other countries (e.g., Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, Italy), and these programs take various forms (Britton & Button, 2006). Underlying the programs is increased inmate access to relational connections with animals.

The inaugural issue of *The Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Research* shares that "[i]n order to fully explore the broad range of meanings encapsulated in the term 'justice', we must turn to disciplines (and practices) not typically associated with the study of crime and criminal justice" (Kohm & Weinrath, 2010, p. 8). This paper does just that in its evaluation of the impact of a visiting therapy dog program in a federal Canadian, multi-level security correctional institution. Interviews were held with 10 program participants, 3 therapy dog handlers and the program coordinator.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the objectives of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* are attained—for humans to connect with a therapy dog through its perceived offering of love and support—in an environment where access to relational connections is denied. This denial is posited as unjust because other-than-human relationships can be significant to some individuals' mental health. We also examined benefits and challenges outside of the program objectives. This understudied area has implications for supporting inmate mental health in a manner that recognizes domestic animals as part of a just prison existence.

Human-Animal Bond

The human-animal bond is defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association (2018b) as "a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment" (para. 1). The AAI experience is described by Young (2012) as "a tactile process whereby unconditional attachment bonds form between animals and humans" (p. 218).

Over the past decade the benefits of the human animal-bond on human health has been increasingly recognized in both practice and research. At present, approximately 80 percent of Canadian households have a live-in companion animal, representing a 10 percent increase over the past 10 years (Canadian Animal Health Institute [CAHI], 2017). Research on pet ownership has progressively identified its benefits for human health, termed "zooeyia." In an exhaustive review of the empirical literature, Hodgson et al. (2015) categorize four primary benefits of pet ownership across the human lifespan: as builders of social capital (e.g., dog owners converse with other dog owners), as agents of harm reduction (e.g., pet owners do not smoke in the presence of their pet), as motivators for healthy behaviour change (e.g., dog owners engage in exercise while taking

their dog for a walk) and as potential participants in treatment plans (e.g., petting a cat can increase feel-good oxytocin hormones in humans). Hodgson et al. (2015) also recognized the risks of companion animals to humans, including potential constraints on financial resources and zoonotic disease transmission (e.g., rabies).

Relational-Cultural Theory

Relational-cultural theory (RCT) suggests that positive relationships are important contributing factors to an individual's healthy development and well-being. RCT was initially suggested in the 1970s by Jean Baker Miller and expanded upon 20 years later by Judith Jordan (Thomas & Matusitz, 2016). This theory postulates that loneliness and isolation create human experiences that lack growth-enhancing relationships. These experiences are often intertwined with intersecting social identity dimensions of marginalized persons and groups (e.g., prisoners). Without positive social interactions, disconnection from others and limited opportunities for empathic experiences can result (Thomas & Matusitz, 2016). The theoretical premise of RCT focuses on individual healing within the context of mutually empathic relationships. As such, RCT has therapeutic application within a prison context where inmates are often misunderstood, experience disconnection from self and society, and face isolation.

Thomas and Matusitz (2016) apply the theoretical tenets of RCT to understand how animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) offered in prisons may be beneficial. In particular, they propose that the inclusion of animals in prisons provides a therapeutic, rehabilitative approach that allows for the development of relational connections, which can help to reduce isolation and enhance healing. This approach can also work to bridge relationships with other inmates. Covington (1998 as cited in Thomas & Matusitz, 2016) suggests that prisoner-animal relationships can be empowering with important psychological outcomes such as increased self-other understanding, and motivation for further connections. Given the isolation inmates

experience as a part of prisonization, AAIs may be a means to develop relational connections, and posited here to be as access to justice.

Animal-Assisted Activities in Prison

AAIs with humans include animal-assisted activity (AAA), animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted education (AAE) programs (Pet Partners, n.d.). AAAs are visiting programs that "provide opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance the quality of life. While more informal in nature, these activities are delivered by a specially trained professional, paraprofessional, and/or volunteer, in partnership with an animal that meets specific criteria for suitability" (Pet Partners, n.d., para. 4). They can take place in a variety of informal environments, from senior care homes to university campuses (Huss, 2012). "Key features include absence of specific treatment goals; volunteers and treatment providers are not required to take detailed notes; [and] visit content is spontaneous" (Delta Society, n.d., as cited in Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 23).

AAIs are common in the United States prison system. In a 2004 survey of prison administrators, AAIs were identified in 159 American correctional institutions (Furst, 2006a). A decade later, the number of programs nearly doubled to 290 (Cooke & Farrington, 2016). The majority of the programs focus on training dogs from rescue organizations (Chianese, 2009; Demyan, 2008; Divin, 2009; Fournier, Geller, & Fortney, 2007; Furst, 2006b; Gilger, 2007; Harkrader, Burke, & Owen, 2004; Hill, 2016; King, 2014; Suber, 2008; Turner, 2007; Weaver, 2015) for canine service work (Britton & Button, 2005; Cheakalos, 2004; Currie, 2008; Osborne & Bair, 2003) or for an increased chance of adoption as pets by the general public (Divin, 2009; Moneymaker & Strimple, 1991). The benefits to prisoner mental health are acknowledged, but in most cases it is not the programming goal (Fournier et al., 2007; Mercer, Gibson, & Clayton, 2015).

Canada has several AAIs in federal prisons. There is a canine training program at Nova Institution for Women (*Pawsitive Directions Canine Program* [female]) and Fraser Valley Institution (*Doghouse Canine Program* [female]). There is an AAA program (*St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program*) at Stony Mountain Institution (male), which is the focus of this paper. There is also an AAE-type program at Drumheller Institution (*PAWSitive Support Canine Assisted Learning Program* [male]) and an AAT program at the Regional Psychiatric Centre (*St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* [female and male]). The Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (female) offers the *Nekaneet Horse Program*, a blended form of equine therapy and traditional Cree teachings. If other AAIs exist, they are not formally offered. A recent and related development is the public release of the 2018 CSC Commissioner's mandate letter, issued by the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. In it, the oncoming Commissioner was encouraged to offer evidence-based rehabilitative programming and "partner with and support community organizations and volunteers in order to provide a greater variety of programming alternatives, such as…programs involving animals" (Goodale, 2018).

There is limited research on AAIs in or by the Canadian federal prison system, with only three publications known to the authors of this paper. The first is a 1998 CSC literature review of pet-facilitated therapy in correctional institutions; it concluded that the programs benefit the inmates, animals, staff and community outside the prison with the reintegration of trained dogs (CSC, 1998). The second is a 2001 supportive evaluation of the *Pawsitive Directions Canine Program* at Nova Institution for Women undertaken by CSC (Richardson-Taylor & Blanchette, 2001). The third is a case report of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* at the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatchewan, in which the AAI was identified as complementing a trauma-informed approach to prisoner health (Dell & Poole, 2015).

In Canada and elsewhere there is a recognized need for increased research on the impact of AAIs in correctional institutions, especially given that they are being offered more and more frequently (Mulcahy & McLaughlin, 2013). This includes the need for research specific to the impacts of AAIs on inmate mental health (Allison & Ramaswamy, 2016; Deaton, 2005). In addition to an absence of studies, those that exist are frequently characterized as methodologically weak because of small sample sizes, not being reproduced, and overly qualitative in scope (Borrego et al., 2014; Conniff, Scarlett, Goodman, & Appel, 2005; Cook & Farrington, 2014; Gilger, 2007; Herzog, 2011; Kamioka et al., 2014). For example, the initial study of a dog incorporated into group therapy sessions at a Utah women's prison had a positive impact (Jasperson, 2010), but this was not replicated in a second study (Jasperson, 2013).

A 2016 systematic review and meta-analysis of 10 studies in the AAI prison literature found that the programs reviewed had a beneficial effect on inmates, although it was only based on a limited number of studies that met the inclusion criteria (Cooke & Farrington, 2016). An earlier meta-analysis of 49 studies of AAT programs generally in the United States also supported their effectiveness (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Inmates participating in AAIs generally report psychosocial benefits, including reduced depression and increased confidence, self-esteem, trust, self-control and pride (Currie, 2008; Deaton, 2005; Fournier et. al., 2007; Furst, 2007; Hill, 2016; Osborne & Bair, 2003; Provencher, 2015; Strimple, 2003; Suber, 2008; Turner, 2007). Studies of prison administrators have also indicated support, citing fewer disciplinary infractions and reduced institutional tension (Furst, 2006a; Hill, 2016; Turner 2007). Given the dearth of available research, relevant outcomes of AAI studies not specific to prisons are shared in the discussion of the findings of this study.

St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program

The *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* has a 26-year history

in Canada; it was initiated in 1992 in Ontario and expanded to Manitoba in 1997, with over 150 handler and therapy dog teams currently volunteering in the province.[3] The goal of the therapy dog program coincides with that of the organization—to offer charitable, humanitarian care to the sick and injured. The therapy dog program has two objectives: to offer support and love to the individuals with whom the dogs and handlers visit (St. John Ambulance, 2015). Therapy dog teams attend in a variety of settings, including schools, senior care homes, hospitals and daycare centres. With increasing attention to the benefits of the human-animal bond, and at the request of communities, teams have recently responded to Canadian tragedies, including at the Royal University Hospital for the Humboldt Broncos bus crash and at a community vigil for the downtown Toronto van attack (City News, 2018; Nielsen, 2018).

The *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* was initiated at Stony Mountain Institution[4] in July 2015. The program was started by the Assistant Warden and is organized by the institutional program coordinator in the Psychology Department. The program is voluntary for the 30 minimum- and medium-security-level inmates on the mental health range who are sentenced for largely violence- and alcohol/drug-related crimes and require specific mental health

[3] To become a St. John Ambulance therapy dog team, the handler must be 18 years of age or older and physically and mentally capable of performing the duties of a handler. The dog must be accepting of a friendly stranger, sit calmly for petting, walk on a loose leash, walk through a crowd, sit on command/stay in place and react well to another dog or to distractions (St. John Ambulance, 2017). A therapy dog team commits to volunteering at minimum once a month and provides a veterinary record of vaccinations and any behaviour- related issues with the dog once a year. The handlers also sign an annual attestation form to verify their Criminal Record Check and provide an updated check every three years. The human-dog team is re-tested if the dog has had any significant health issues or if they have not visited for a period of six months or more (St. John Ambulance, 2017). Coordination of all therapy dog team visits is administered by the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program*.

[4] Stony Mountain Institution is one of two remaining federal institutions operating in Canada that was built in the 19th century. It is a multi-level (minimum, medium, maximum) security institution and it recently incorporated Rockwood Institution and a new 96-bed maximum-security unit. Prior to this, Rockwood was a minimum-security facility, which was established in 1962 adjacent to Stony Mountain (CSC, 2017b).

supports. The inmates participate in the therapy dog program by indicating their interest in visiting with a therapy dog to the program coordinator. The majority of inmates on the range have limited community support; the therapy dog program provides an additional outside resource.

The therapy dog visits take place weekly, unless the therapy dog team is not available (e.g., due to holidays or illness). Three therapy dog and handler teams visited on separate weeks when the study took place. The visits were in a one-on-one format and lasted approximately 30 minutes. On average, four inmates visited with a therapy dog each week.

Unlike formalized programming in prison where clinicians direct the session, in the therapy dog program the interaction is guided by the participants (e.g., amount and focus of conversation). That said, the prison program coordinator, a 23-year employee of Stony Mountain Institution, both supervises the sessions and frequently joins in the conversation. Depending on the participant, the program coordinator, for example, may have a directed conversation with the inmate who shares grievances about the institution. Given that the participants are from a mental health range, the program coordinator attends for the duration of each session. This is different than a typical animal-assisted activity visit in other environments and is largely due to the unique security and safety issues presented in the prison, as well as the immediate, potential mental health supports that may be required by the program participants. Similar to the vast majority of AAAs, however, is that the therapy dogs visit where access to animals—and, therefore, a relational connection—is typically denied or severely limited (e.g., hospital emergency department, long-term care facility).

Methodology, Method and Analysis

This study was designed to gain preliminary insight into the outcomes of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* at Stony Mountain Institution. Acknowledging the dearth and limitations of prior research on AAIs in a prison setting, an exploratory sequential

design was applied for the purpose of evaluating the study area. As outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), this four-phase, mixed-methods research approach begins with the collection of qualitative data. This phase one data will be built upon in the future to develop quantitative measures. Ethics exemption was granted from the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) Human Research Ethics Board, given the evaluative focus of the project. Approval was secured from the U of S Animal Research Ethics Board and adhered to the Canadian Council on Animal Care guidelines for humane animal use. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Manitoba *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program*, Stony Mountain Institution and the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina to agree upon principles and practices for undertaking the research and disseminating the findings.

Inmate and therapy dog handler study participants were recruited by the institutional program coordinator. Explanation of the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, confidentiality and the right to withdraw without any repercussion was provided to all participants prior to their participation. Informed consent preceded data collection. Data was collected through a semi-structured interview method with a purposive sample of 10 program participants, the 3 therapy dog handlers visiting at the time of the study and the prison program coordinator. In total, 81 inmates have had contact with a therapy dog team since the start of the program in 2015. The inmate sample was all participants on the mental health range at Stony Mountain Institution at the time of the study who had visited with a therapy dog on a minimum of three occasions. The therapy dog handlers were the only handlers that had been involved with the program since its inception. On average, the participants visited with the therapy dogs 15 times, with a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 39 encounters. All participants were male and ranged from 28 to 67 years of age, with an average of 52 years. Seven were white and three were Indigenous. Half of the participants were serving life sentences, with three not eligible for release, and one had internal charges at the

institution.

The in-person interviews were conducted at Stony Mountain Institution over two days in March 2017. A semi-structured interview guide comprised of nine questions was used. The interview areas were: participants' overall experiences with the program, feeling love[5] and support from the therapy dogs, connection with the therapy dogs, change as a result of the program, and program limitations. To illustrate, one question asked if the participants felt they had a connection with the therapy dogs. This was followed by asking what they thought the benefits of the connection was to their well-being, if any. The interviews were held outside of the therapy dog visits, in a private room in the institution, and with two researchers and no staff member in attendance. On average, the interviews were 45 minutes in length, with a longer interview with the program coordinator (75 minutes). Shorter interviews (all approximately 20 minutes) were held with the therapy dog handlers over the telephone in the same month. Two of the handlers were female and the third was male. The dogs were three years old, four years old, and an unknown age, and the group consisted of a Whippet, a Bullmastiff cross-breed and a Newfoundland Border Collie cross-breed, respectively. All therapy dog handlers and dogs had been volunteering with the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* for at least one year. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Given the exploratory and evaluative design of this study, qualitative data was gathered from three sources (i.e., participants, therapy dog handlers and the, prison program coordinator) with the aim of collectively co-creating the program participants' stories (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interviews documented

[5] The term "love" was initially applied in this study, as it is a stated objective of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program*. If a program participant questioned what was meant by love in an interview, we followed up with the word comfort. Oftentimes, the two words were presented together upfront for clarity. This was in response to other experiences by the authors with evaluations of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* and attempts to measure love as one of the program's objectives.

participants' subjective experiences, meanings and processes, and the handlers' and program coordinator's reflections and insights (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). According to Patton (2002), when implementing program evaluations, hearing the "*program's story* by capturing and communicating the *participants' stories*" (p. 10) can highlight how the program operates and the relation to outcomes. Thus, all interviewees were encouraged to "describe the meaning of the lived experience of the phenomena" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373) that included their stories, experiences and perceptions of the program to deepen understanding.

The data was analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis. Analysis was conducted on the de-identified interview transcripts to protect confidentiality of the participants due to the small sample size. The de-identified data analysis prevented stratification of the sample based on age, race, sentence, prison security level or therapy dog visitor; therefore, comparisons across groups based on these identifiers are not possible. Our analysis sought to identify recurrent patterns, or themes, in the textual data with both closed and open coding (Creswell, 2013). The a priori codes were selected from the overall objectives of the *St. John's Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* (for inmates to connect with a therapy dog through the dog's perceived offering of love and support) and from the interview guide that was developed based on a review of the literature.

The open codes were selected from four reviews of the transcriptions. During the first review, initial codes and text segments were identified and preliminary themes outlined. The subsequent reviews drew upon codes from the previous review(s), with codes being continually added, supported or modified. This multiple review process refined the preliminary themes and further reduced the data. Following theme generation from analysis of the de-identified participant interviews, the interviews with the staff and handlers were reviewed. Additional text segments supporting the codes and themes

were identified, as well as new codes added that were not captured in the initial review of the participant interviews. Throughout, themes were compared and clustered based on similarity in meaning, experience and process (Kirby et al., 2006; Saldana, 2010; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The data was eventually reduced to between three to six themes each in four broad areas, encapsulating the a priori and open codes identified in the transcriptions. Results across the participants, therapy dog handlers and the program coordinator are presented together, given the preliminary, exploratory nature of this evaluative study and its small sample size.

Findings and Discussion

Support for both objectives of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* was identified (love and support). At the same time, the outcomes of the program are posited as just because prisoners have access to relational connections with dogs in an environment where they are presently denied this and generally experience isolation. The therapy dog program extends notions about the nature of relationships, love and support beyond merely human-to-human interactions. Insight was gained into the program's mental health benefits for inmates. Love was experienced by the inmates as an effortless and reciprocal closeness with the therapy dogs and with no external expectations. Support was experienced by the participants as trustworthy communication, meaningful motivation and a sense of grounding, all difficult to achieve while incarcerated. Additional insight on two challenges frequently faced by correctional institutions was uncovered: criticism of mandatory programming, and exaggerated and problematic forms of masculinity, termed "hypermasculinity." All findings are discussed below, drawing upon the prison and other AAI and companion animal literature.

1. Love

All program participants experienced love with the therapy dogs as an effortless and reciprocal closeness and with no external expectations. This was expressed in four key ways (see Table 1).

First, three participants shared that they felt the dogs accepted them and did not judge them for being incarcerated. Second, three participants shared that they experienced love in the program through their own expression of care for the therapy dogs. This included the act of looking after the dogs (e.g., giving a treat) or attempting to make the dogs happy by petting and massaging them. Two participants identified that being physically close to the therapy dogs was another avenue for experiencing love. Both the handlers and the program coordinator emphasized this in their observations. One participant expanded upon their experience of love to include feeling safe and protected when in the presence of the dogs. One participant also described love as unconditional from the dogs, feeling that the love he received was authentic. A handler described the seemingly unconditional nature of the visits between the participants and therapy dogs and the benefits, including the consistency that the therapy dogs provided in what they offered to the participants (e.g., always unconditional). Two participants also described the actual feeling of love from interacting with the therapy dogs, focusing on how love manifested internally for each of them.

Inmates of a federal correctional institution are largely denied access to experiences of love, as described by the therapy dog program participants at Stony Mountain Institution. That is, an effortless and reciprocal closeness with no external expectations. Inmates' relations with family members and friends, where love is most likely experienced, are at a distance and often strained (Arditti et al., 2004; Rodriguez, 2016). Relations with other inmates and staff within an institution are complex due to the conditions of incarceration (Haag, 2006; Hobbs & Dear, 2000). Cooke and Farrington (2016) recognize this in their work on AAIs in prisons, even observing that "[f]or many offenders, participation…may be their first exposure to unconditional love and acceptance, which allows them to express their emotions in a healthy manner" (p. 858).

Table 1: How participants experience love in the therapy dog program

Acceptance/non-judgment	*"You know I have met people and it is very rare in my mind that…they don't judge you…you know how you have met people where it is like you have known them all your life and you just get that comfort and you are very relaxed and you don't mind sharing yourself with that person or telling them your deep dark secrets or whatever, it is the same thing."* Participant 1.
Expressing care for the dogs	*"Well I usually rub [the dog's] ears and neck and [the dog] likes that. [The dog] really likes the massage directly behind the ears."* Participant 4. *"You know, I think that's kind of the beginning of their reintegration into society…You have to realize, hey, I'm not a monster, I can be loved, and I'm capable of caring for things, and I'm capable for showing love…"* Program coordinator.
Physical closeness	*"…just being physically close to the animal and having it respond in a non-threatening or positive manner allowing you to interact with it and it is another living creature that is allowing you into its space and in this environment, personal space is a big issue."* Participant 10.
Unconditional	*"[The dog] loves me. There are no hidden agendas or anything like that."* Participant 1. *"Well I think the fact that [the dog] always greets them, welcomes them… [E]very time they came [the dog] would greet them and sit with them."* Handler 1.
Feeling love	*"A feeling inside, kind of almost a hurting feeling but then it is nice. It is nice to feel again…You get used to being alone but you don't like it and you don't want anybody around you after a while. Being close to the dog you start thinking about the things that you miss and it is motivation to do better and get on with things."* Participant 8. *"…as soon as I walk in and when [the dog] comes running to me like that heaviness slowly goes away and peace comes inside of me…"* Participant 9.

It is well-established that humans can develop love and affection toward companion animals (Fook, 2014; Julius, Beetz, Kotrschal, Turner, & Uvnas-Moberg, 2013). This type of experience has been described as "exceptionally private and unambiguous—unknowable

in human relationships, because, at its deepest level, it is essentially wordless" (Gavriele-Gold, 2011, p. 98). It has also been described as less complicated than human relations because, for example, animals can be called upon for unconditional support at any time (Arkow, 2015). The literature identifies dogs' innate ability to offer and receive nurturance (Chandler, 2005; Levinson, 1984; Melson & Fine, 2010). Therapy dogs in particular present with non-judgmental warmth, companionship and bonding, which, as described by Arkow (2011), in turn nurtures the ability of humans to love and trust. Beck and Katcher (2003) share that "[f]or inmates who live lives absent of touch and acceptance, animals are able to 'stimulate a kind of love and caring that is not poisoned or inhibited by the prisoners' experiences with people" (p. 153). In an interview with a therapy dog handler at the forensic Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatchewan, Wright (2017) shares in her book the handler's observation that the dogs are never interested in what the person was incarcerated for, but rather, who they are as a person with them in the room at that moment. Hogle (2009) similarly identifies this in their overview of prison-based canine training programs.

2. Support

Participants experienced support by the therapy dogs as trustworthy communication, meaningful motivation and a sense of grounding, all difficult to achieve while incarcerated (see Table 2). First, three participants identified their communication with the therapy dogs as a dependable and trustworthy way of feeling supported. To these participants, this meant being able to talk openly to the dogs and have the dogs listen without talking back as humans tend to do. One participant mentioned receiving meaningful motivation from the therapy dogs and that this was a form of support; another participant identified motivation also as a form of love. The therapy dogs were perceived by the participants as motivating them to persevere through struggles, and to do well upon release. This was likewise emphasized by a handler. The therapy dogs also served as an anchor or sense of grounding for two participants, providing stability, and to one

participant in particular the therapy dogs were acknowledged as critical to his well-being. The program coordinator reinforced this finding.

Table 2: How participants experience support in the therapy dog program

Trustworthy communication	*"…you can talk to them. I know as a little kid I used to tell them all my secrets."* Participant 4. *"…even though they can't talk back you know that [the dog] is still there listening…when you say it to a dog you think of things you wouldn't think of if you were saying it to a human looking at them face to face."* Participant 6.
Meaningful motivation	*"I feel supported that I can complete my sentence if I keep seeing the dog in a positive way."* Participant 6. *"I want to go into a shelter and take a dog that nobody wants…Now we have time to spend together and that prevents me even if I don't want to reoffend but at least it is going to give me one more reason to stay out."* Participant 2. *"A lot of the inmates will say to me, 'I can't wait to get out because I can get a dog again.' Very motivated by [the dog]."* Handler 2.
Sense of grounding	*"I love these dogs. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for these dogs…"* Participant 7. *"…for the right individuals, it is hugely impactful…I mean I just look at some of these guys, and…if you asked them what's the biggest thing in their life, they would probably say this."* Program coordinator.

There are arguably numerous, varied and important forms of support for inmates within federal correctional institutions in Canada. However, access to such supports is foremost framed within the context of an inmates' institutional behaviour and risks and needs surrounding their community reintegration. Support from other inmates is also frequently associated with conditions and expectations. A study by Listwan, Colvin, Hanley and Flannery (2010) found that social support in prison increased prisoner well-being. Applying six items on the *Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ6),* they did not, however, measure support as identified by the

therapy dog program participants in this study. That is, trustworthy communication, meaningful motivation and a sense of grounding. These are difficult areas for incarcerated individuals to achieve because of the dynamics of inmate subcultures (Ricciardelli, 2014b; Weinrath, 2016).

Dogs are capable of offering physical, cognitive and emotional support to humans (Vitztum & Urbanik, 2016). Interaction with dogs has been reported by some to parallel the positive social support experienced in human-to-human relationships (Barker & Barker, 1988; Fine & Beck, 2010). Social support is identified as a primary benefit of AAIs, and specifically for individuals who are psychosocially at risk (Fine, 2010). Arkow (2011) refers to therapy dogs in his work as "a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support" (p. 2). Hart (2010) likewise shares that "companion animals can buffer and normalize a stressful circumstance, offering engaging and accepting interactions without reflecting back the concern and agitation of the difficult situation" (p. 76). Companion animals are also perceived by humans as being reliably present in times of trouble (Wells, 2009). Related, a study by Adamle, Riley and Carlson (2009) found that therapy dog visits were beneficial to college freshmen during their first year away from home by "temporarily fill[ing] the absence of previous support systems" (p. 545). There are also a variety of AAI studies documenting the motivation therapy dogs provide to participants, ranging from patients in hospital settings to children practicing their reading skills in animal shelters and schools (Jalongo, 2012; Matuszek, 2010).

It is important to note that there was overlap in the participants' perceived experiences of love and support, and observations of the same as reported by the program coordinator (see Table 3). In human-animal relationships, love and support appear as mutually inclusive, existing side-by-side (Hutton, 2015). This was also identified in a prior study of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* on three Canadian university campuses (Dell et al., 2015).

Table 3: Commonality between participants' experiences of love and support in the therapy dog program

Love	*"I look forward to seeing them because you realize how much it is helping you…because when they are not here you are under so much pressure but whenever they come they bring you so much joy, love and acceptance and just helps bring your anxiety down."* Participant 3. *"…just because of that unconditional love, that's the support right. They know there is no rejection involved…[O]ne guy commented just this week like you know [the dog] just had [its] head on his lap and…was just laying a certain way and he said [the dog's] never done this before…but he appreciated, he still felt supported. Cause he could see the trust in the dog, that dog is laying its head right here, and it's so vulnerable and yet so giving of itself."* Program coordinator.

3. (a) Relational Connection

Given the finding that all participants experienced love and support in the therapy dog program at Stony Mountain Institution, it is not unexpected that they also perceived a meaningful connection or a human-animal bond between themselves and the dogs. How the connections emerged is identified in the subthemes below (see Table 4). Several participants described their connection with the therapy dogs to be in ways congruent with experiencing love and support, including an intersection between love, support and connection. The handlers and program coordinator reinforced this understanding. As shared above, this connection or bond between the participants and therapy dogs is referred to here as a relational connection, to capture the essence of relational theory[6]—that is, the understanding that "all aspects of growth, including mental, emotional, and bodily take place in the context of connections" (Lasher, 1998, p. 130). At the core of this theory is the perceptual experience of attunement—the ability to access information about the environment and gauge the internal states of oneself and another, independent of verbal language and thought (Lasher, 1998).

[6] The terms relational-cultural theory and relational theory, as well as therapy, are used interchangeably in the literature and practice. See: https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/therapy-types/relational-therapy.

The therapy dog program participants shared six key ways in which they related to the therapy dogs to establish a connection, or human-animal bond (see Table 4). First, three participants spoke of feeling understood by and understanding the therapy dogs. They expressed gauging each other's moods and respecting the needs of the other. Second, through spending time with the therapy dogs, three participants described fostering a relationship with them. Each participant articulated that they knew they had connected with the dogs because they felt they had built a special relationship in which they mutually wanted to spend time together. Three participants also discussed getting to know the dogs and their personalities, likes and wants as a part of this. Third, three participants relayed upon meeting the therapy dogs that they were genuinely happy to see them, and the dogs reciprocated. Next, two of the participants shared how they experienced lasting impacts from the connection, linking this to both the connection itself and its benefits. One participant also experienced connection through perceived trust and protection, with themselves as the recipient. The program coordinator and a handler also shared that the participants were able to freely give affection to and receive it from the therapy dogs, once more identifying this as helping to build the connection.

The *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* participants' perceived connections with the therapy dogs, which supports Thomas and Matusitz's (2016) claim that humans can experience a relational connectedness with an animal just as they can with another human. They identify in their work that "when pet therapy is used in prisons a symbiotic relationship develops between pets and prison inmates" (Thomas & Matusitz, 2016, p. 1). They explain that "Relational-Cultural Theory is instrumental in providing an understanding of how humans are relationally-dependent beings with a basic desire for a connected relationship" (Thomas & Matusitz, 2016, p. 7). This is supported in the companion animal literature; for example, pet ownership has been demonstrated to decrease humans' feelings of isolation (Hodgson et al., 2015). At the same time, relational-cultural

Table 4: Ways participants developed a relational connection with the therapy dogs

Understanding one another	*"They can understand feelings and stuff like that; they know when a person is down and will try to do something to bring a person back up again."* Participant 4. *"…sometimes for the first couple of minutes I don't do anything and the dog doesn't do anything you just wait. It is like [the dog] respects my boundaries and probably thinks that I don't feel good that day."* Participant 2. *"[The dog] greets everyone differently because [the dog] knows them… [The dog] has different relationships with them all. [The dog] had one guy who [the dog] would talk to [by yowling] and he was the only one."* Handler 1.
Building a mutual relationship	*"…[the dog] went in front of me and I sat down on the floor and I was giving [the dog] some pets telling [the dog] that I had to go and I started going and again [the dog] cut me off and sat down in front of me. [The dog] didn't want me to leave."* Participant 8. *"…[a particular whining behaviour] doesn't happen when you first meet with [this specific dog] but after a while it does…You don't realize after you have seen them so much and you start to get to know their little characters…it is fun."* Participant 3.
Showing happiness	*"Being happy to see me and [the dog] comes to me right away…is not scared of me and…comes and sits with me and that is when I hold [the dog]…"* Participant 9.
Experiencing lasting impacts	*"…the feelings and the thoughts that [the dog] put me in touch with will last me forever."* Participant 8.
Trusting and protection	*"…all my life I have been abused and with [the dog] I knew that wouldn't happen…that [the dog] wouldn't attack me and the other day the guard came and he said something and right away [the dog] turned and barked. [The dog] was very protective of me."* Participant 2.
Expressing affection	*"I got down nose to nose with [the dog] and I gave [the dog] a scratch behind the ear and then [the dog] sort of put [its] head against the side of mine and then I gave [the dog] a hug…[the dog] jumped up beside me and…kind of leaned on my shoulder and I was 'oh it is so nice to meet you' and there were hugs."* Participant 8. *"…and most of these guys they just want to cuddle…believe it or not, they are cuddlers."* Program coordinator. *"It's just having that personal comfort, to be able to hug and touch the dog, something that they really miss with either an animal or a person."* Handler 3.

theory acknowledges the relationship between humans and non-human animals as satisfying the needs of both (Laing & Maylea, 2018). As shared, connection is necessary for human development (Lasher, 1998), and CSC (2015) identifies as part of its mission: "…actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens" (para. 7).

Developing a connection with animals, and in particular therapy dogs, is a possible avenue to establishing a connection with another sentient being while incarcerated, be it an inmate, staff member in the institution or a family member outside the walls. Thomas and Matusitz (2016) acknowledge that the symbiotic relationship developed between human and non-human animals in a prison setting can improve inmates' relationships with people. For example, through their intense sense of smell, therapy dogs can identify the hormones related to human emotions (e.g., sadness or stress) and respond accordingly (e.g., offer physical comfort), indicating their understanding of the human. This can likewise contribute to the development of a mutual relationship between the two. The literature also shares that animals can initiate happy memories and improve humans' moods (Arkow 2011; Handlin et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2009). This may be due in part to beneficial hormones and neurochemicals, such as oxytocin, that are released when petting an animal (Odendaal & Lehmann, 2000). Harris (as cited in Johnson, 2011) also explains that animals live in the moment and that "by expressing their pure joy at seeing us, our pets teach us that living in the moment is not only a healthy thing to do, but also helps us to feel happier" (p. 33). Our connections with animals are also documented as having long-term and lasting impacts, even after the animal's death (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; King & Werner, 2012; Podrazik, Shackford, Becker & Heckert, 2000). As well, the companion animal literature indicates that trust is relatively easy to establish between humans and animals, and may also increase human-to-human trust when in the presence of a dog, for example (Gueguen & Cicotti, 2008). This was likewise identified in a United Kingdom prison

animal program, and specifically among inmates who "typically struggled with trusting others" (Mercer et al., 2015, p. 49). Related, animals are identified as a safe place to relay affection, including in prison therapy dog programs (Moneymaker & Strimple, 1991).

3. (b) Benefits of a relational connection

There were three key benefits from the perceived connection expressed by the program participants, the program coordinator and therapy dog handlers (see Table 5). First, half of the participants viewed the therapy dog as a family member or friend, which occurred more frequently among inmates who had very limited or no connections. This perception and participants' actions, such as displaying photos of the therapy dogs on their cell walls, highlights the strength of the connection established between the participants and therapy dogs. According to the work of Beck and Meyers (1996), companion animals can serve a familial role because of their abundance of desirable relational attributes. Second, participants expressed feeling a sense of well-being from their connection with the therapy dogs. Two participants noted their favourite part of the therapy dog visit was how it made them feel when they first saw the dog. As shared, inmate mental health is a serious concern in the prison system, including the potential impacts of incarceration itself. A pre/post study of a dog training program in a Viennese prison concluded that program participants had greater improvements in emotional regulation, emotional self-control and acceptance of their emotions (Burger, Stetina, Turner, McElheney, & Handlos, 2011). And third, nearly all of the participants in the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* spoke about how the therapy dog visits allowed them to "escape" the institutional environment, the noise and chaos of prison; whether it was during their visits with the dogs, thinking about the dogs outside of visits, or through their memories of their or their family members' own pets. As stated above, the literature identifies the detrimental mental health impacts of a prison environment and how difficult it is to avoid.

All ten participants, the handlers, and the program coordinator

identified positive participant changes as a result of participating in the therapy dog program (see Table 6). Once again, the mission of Correctional Service Canada (2015) includes "actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens" (para. 7). Cooke and Farrington (2016) share that in the AAI research literature the benefits of therapy animals are linked to pro-social (non-criminal) conduct. Eight of the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* participants recognized immediate short-term improvement in their mood and relaxation and a decrease in their stress level from visiting with the therapy dogs. A qualitative study likewise concluded that the moods of dog-assisted program participants in a Japanese prison generally improved (Koda, Watanabe, Miyaji, Ishida, & Miyaji, 2014). A review of a United Kingdom prison-based animal program also identified improved mood and the related behaviour of inmates who spent time with animals, and in particular dogs (Mercer et al., 2015). The companion animal and AAI literature further suggest that animals can instill relief from stress (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002; Kruger & Serpell, 2010).

While the majority of participants in our study reported short-term changes, three participants also reported more significant and longer-term positive impacts upon their mental health. The therapy dog program aided these participants with finding and maintaining stability, increasing awareness of their emotions, and reducing symptoms of mental health conditions such as depression and the effects of trauma (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder). These are important findings given that addressing mental health is a significant concern for corrections.

Table 5: Key benefits of the participant-therapy dog connection

Family member/ friend	*"…it feels like family and just having that friendliness, love even for a short period of time means so much because it has been very difficult being here."* Participant 3. *"…I have a real friend now because when guys say that you are friends and they are only bugging you for your food that is not real friends, but this dog here…is real to me…"* Participant 9.
Sense of well-being	*"I have been alone for quite some time and just having that contact and so genuine, it made me feel all warm inside. I think the first time I cried."* Participant 8. *"You just feel better when you are done visiting with them…when you are leaving you are happy, you are upbeat, and you are ready to tackle the next day before it has even started."* Participant 6. *"They are just so excited to see the dog, when the time is up they make sure that you are going to be there next week. You see a big smile on their face when they see the dog."* Handler 3.
"Escaping" the institutional environment	*"I would say for that moment in time this place doesn't have to exist…it is just me and [the dog] and for that moment I don't have to worry about what is going on here or when I might get out or my next DTA or someone angry at me or all the bullshit that goes along with an institution. I don't have to worry about it because in that moment I am not here."* Participant 1. *"…I look at the pictures [of the dog] sometimes when I don't feel good…and I imagine [the dog] here and what I would do."* Participant 2. *"…[the dog] kind of reminds me like my Granny used to have one but her face wasn't black it was brown but he got shot and my Granny was really hurt…So one day me and my mom went to a pet shop and bought her a little puppy…and she was so happy I saw tears on her face…My body every time I see [the therapy dog] I want to cry because it reminds me of my Granny's dog…well when I first met [the dog] it reminded me of my Grandma's dog and guess when [the dog] saw tears coming down my eyes [the dog] licked my face and…was wiping them I guess. [The dog] was telling me 'don't worry I am here for you.' I was just thinking something is telling me that [the dog] is saying you are safe, you are with us, and we will protect you."* Participant 7.

Six of the ten participants in the therapy dog program at Stony Mountain Institution described an improvement in their attitude toward others and themselves, most notably reflected in their increased socialization. Participants reported being more open to conversations with others as well as being more patient. The program coordinator noted that in the sessions the dogs acted as facilitators of conversation between the participants and handlers and staff member. Changes in participants' attitudes toward themselves were also notable, including a more positive outlook on their futures. A study of two service dog and adoption training programs in prisons in the United States identified beneficial change in inmates' attitudes and emotions, including anger, patience, unconditional love and "simply doing time" (Britton & Button, 2005). Another study of a canine training program with male inmates in a United States correctional institution identified a positive effect on inmate participants' behaviour (Currie, 2008). This was similarly identified in a 1991 study, specifically citing a decrease in aggressive tendencies among inmates (Haynes, 1991). A 1989 study of a program which allowed pets to live with inmates did not find this (Katcher, Beck, & Levine, 1989).

Table 6: Benefits of therapy dog program participation

Short-term improvement in mood on the correctional unit	*"Well it makes me feel more comfortable when I go back on the range and less irritable. So it does happen like that it affects my mood and I may have a bad mood when I come but I leave here with a good mood."* Participant 4. *"If I come in tense by the time I leave I am relaxed… I just have a better outlook on the day you know, I am seeing things more with a smile than say negative eyes… I just feel good for the day…but the nature of the place kind of takes that away but for a day or two you are calmer."* Participant 1.
Longer-term improvement in mental health	*"…this one extra little thing might be just enough to keep me from doing something stupid and so you know if you look for those things in your life and those opportunities and resources and take advantage of them then you are kind of building a little bit of a shield against the hard times."* Participant 10. *"They put me in touch with my feelings, make me feel more human. I feel bitter about things, stressed out, aggravated and at my wits' end about the environment, I have got my ear plugs in and tuning everything out and I go visit the dog and makes me feel like it is so refreshing. It gives me a whole new perspective on things. I start thinking about all the things that I am missing, all the things I have to look forward to, my conversations on the phone they get better, my interactions with other people improves."* Participant 8.
Positive attitude toward self and others	*"…you know sometimes I really don't interact that much with the dog but just him or her being there kind of facilitates the ability to socialize with these people but normally I wouldn't socialize with [staff member] on that level…because he is a guard and I am an inmate. So in that respect it may help both of us to kind of personalize each other more than you know that stigma of being stamped as an inmate or guard."* Participant 10. *"I would say my attitude has changed a lot towards other inmates. I am more outgoing with them, more patient."* Participant 6. *"And another inmate…you know, he doesn't talk…to anyone…and this guy's in there, you should see this guy talk… But it's also the volunteer…he starts talking about his childhood and just, I mean, everything, like deep deep stuff…he's still like yeah, you know, cuddling the dog and joking but just like, they're saying this guy doesn't talk."* Program coordinator. *"…one inmate…who has a very horrendous history, who is very antisocial, and over the last, well almost two years, I've seen a transformation, and he's not doing any other programs. Now that's significant cause a lot of times with these things, you…could attribute it to other factors, not for him…I've known him before this. He's [got] very hard views, and I've seen him change. I've seen the start of positive change."* Program coordinator.

4. Therapy Dog Program Challenges

The participants identified several challenges for the therapy dog program, including the minimal length of the visits, the sterile prison environment, limited accessibility to the program and the eventual termination of relationships (see Table 7). Five participants described how the visiting sessions were often too short. Two handlers and the program coordinator further emphasized this point. Four of the participants suggested improvements in the environment of the program, suggesting a space that is less sterile, such as going outside with the dogs. Two participants spoke of the limited accessibility of the program, noting that many other inmates wanted to participate but were not permitted. As previously discussed, participants frequently viewed the dogs as family or friends, and some acknowledged the importance of the relationship with the dogs as crucial for their survival. The program coordinator shared that terminating the relationship with the dogs could be difficult for participants, but at the same time he acknowledged the importance of learning to say goodbye in a healthy way.

Table 7: Therapy dog program challenges

Minimal length of visits	*"…it is always oh you have got to go back to the jungle like in here you are petting the dog, talking to…the handler…and your time is up."* Participant 5.
Sterile prison environment	*"…this is very sterile. I would rather have something homier it would help guys because being in prison most of the time you walk around with your guard up… So when you walk into the room and it is sterile like this you're going by your experiences with staff and a lot of them are negative…"* Participant 1.
Lack of accessibility	*"I know a lot of people would love to get into the program but you can't do everybody here."* Participant 6.
Termination of relationships	"*It's a slippery slope. And I think they can learn a valuable life lesson by sometimes we have to say goodbye."* Program coordinator.

4. Institutional Insight

Insight into two challenging areas for prisons was uncovered (see Table 8). The first is the makeup of the therapy dog program itself in comparison to mandatory prison programming. Three participants felt that the qualitative make-up of the therapy dog program was entirely different in comparison to mandatory institutional programming. They highlighted the unique benefit of the therapy dogs (e.g., they touch the heart) and how this cannot, in their view, be gained through regular programming or other institutional means. Three participants suggested that other programs at the institution could benefit from having therapy dogs present, and/or that new programs could be created to incorporate therapy dogs in meaningful ways beyond visiting. This may in part be explained by researchers, such as Ricciardelli (2014b), who identify the need for tangible, hands-on, practice-based programming in prisons.

A second identified benefit of the therapy dog program is that it allows participants to step outside the stereotypical dominant male prisoner gender stereotype, and in turn, this challenges the detrimental role of hypermasculinity in a prison setting. Hypermasculinity is an exaggerated form of hegemonic masculinity, such as displays of toughness and the hiding of emotions. It is identified as a norm within a prison for both survival and coping (Michalski, 2015). The work of Ricciardelli (2013) on establishing and asserting masculinity in Canadian penitentiaries refers to the "hypermasculine nature of the prison experience" (p. 170). It was suggested that the therapy dogs encourage participants to show affection. It is difficult to identify other correctional programming or other options that allow for the display of vulnerability and possibly even weakness. One participant did, however, note some concern with his participation in the therapy dog program because it confronted his tough persona and reputation in the institution.

Table 8: Insight on two institutional challenges

Mandatory programming	*"A person can relate better to the dogs, they are not forced to relate to them and in programming I find I have to take all these programs because that is part of the course and most of the time I have to take them that I don't care about one way or another. It doesn't mean shit to me but this means something for me. The dogs mean something to me…"* Participant 4. *"…it has actually touched the heart where a lot of the programs they don't touch the heart."* Participant 1. *"In the beginning of this [other] program you are supposed to share about the day or the next day or the day before and so I am sharing that and of course my stress level is going…but if [the dog] had been in that room I could have talked about it you know petting [the dog] and maybe I would have done it in a calmer way."* Participant 1. *"It would be nice if everybody could have a visit with the dog and then the next day talk about the things that made them think about. It knocks down a lot of barriers to get in touch with those feelings because you start to become rather callous in there…"* Participant 8. *"Well I guess the part…I don't want to see what will happen because eventually he is going to take that program away. I learned something in jail that everything that is good they find a way to take it away."* Participant 2. *"…it's a voluntary program, they don't have to be here. It's not attached to their parole conditions or anything else, and in that sense it's really unique…and yeah the inmates are absolutely engaged…"* Program coordinator.
Hypermasculinity	*"You know we are all men, we don't touch each other, we don't say we love you, we don't hug so having a nonjudgmental creature that allows you to do that and it is not another man so there is no issue there of masculinity…"* Participant 10. *"Well in prison you have to show you are strong; if you are weak you get stomped I mean you get muscled in here…and the guys know me from the street…so they would be thinking 'holy fuck he is going to see a dog.'"* Participant 5. *"…I was thinking before I came in to see the dog what are they going to think I am weak now."* Participant 5.

Limitations and Next Steps

While the AAI practice field has increased in recent years, there is a notable absence of an evidence base that has informed this increase. This includes a dearth of strong methodological study designs to learn from and studies to replicate. The limitations of this study are understood in this context, as well as the authors' attempt to address this by triangulating our data sources in evaluating the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* (interviews with the program participants, therapy dog handlers and institutional program coordinator). First, the challenges of undertaking any research within a correctional environment are well known, including, for example, high participant turnover due to transfers, segregation and release. That was no different in this study. Second, the participants in the therapy dog program were self-selected based on their admiration for dogs, which introduced participant selection bias. It was also problematic that there was no control group, recognizing though that it was an evaluation study (Bachi, 2013; Cooke & Farrington, 2016). Third, we did not account for the role and impact of the therapy dog handlers or the program coordinator. The handlers' offering of support alongside the therapy animals has only recently been acknowledged in the literature (Adams et al., 2015). Literature that accounts for the presence of an institutional coordinator in the AAA sessions is not known to the authors. Fourth, we did not study the welfare of the therapy dogs or account for their individual personalities, which is commonly neglected in AAI research (Hatch, 2007; Koda et al., 2015). Fifth, and last, few program limitations were identified beyond the obvious by the participants (e.g., longer and more frequent visits). This has been a common experience of studies in the field (Dell, Chalmers, & Gillet, 2015a; Dell, Chalmers, & Gillet, 2015b; Dell et al., 2015).

Further study in this area is warranted. Research suggestions include the introduction of a larger sample size, diversity amongst participants, non–mental health range participants, a comparison group and post-incarceration follow-up. It would be valuable, for

example, to examine the relationship between participation in the therapy dog program and cultural teachings for Indigenous participants, and situating access to animals as a cultural right rooted in an Indigenous worldview. It is also suggested that the viability of integrating the therapy dog program with mandatory programming at Stony Mountain Institution be explored. It may also be worthwhile to consider integrating inmates' existing and past loving and supportive connections with companion animals into their correctional plans. And last, attention to non-domestic animals on prison property (e.g., prison farms that remain in Canada) should be evaluated for the products produced as well as the outcomes of the relational connections potentially formed.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that AAIs in prison, and specifically an animal-assisted activity (AAA), are worth further examination for their potentially beneficial impact on participant mental health. Participants in the *St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program* at Stony Mountain Institution perceived to receive a form of love and support from the therapy dogs, experienced as a connection or human-animal bond, in a correctional environment where access to relational connections is denied. Denying access to animals is posited as unjust. The therapy dog program extends notions about the nature of relationships, love and support beyond human-to-human relationships. As shared in *The Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Research,* "[P]racticing justice…requires that we open our minds to perspectives and interpretations beyond our own" (Kohm & Weinrath, 2010, p. 8). Love was experienced by the participants as an effortless and reciprocal closeness with the therapy dogs and with no external expectations. Support was experienced as trustworthy communication, meaningful motivation and a sense of grounding with the therapy dogs, all difficult areas to achieve while incarcerated. We also gained insight into two challenges faced by correctional institutions: mandatory programming and

hypermasculinity. The next step in our exploratory sequential evaluation design is to examine quantitative tools based on the qualitative findings presented in this paper. Such research attention is in direct support of the Commissioner's mandate letter recognizing the potential benefit of evidence-based animal programs on prisoner well-being.

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