Research Review

Use of Drug Detection Dogs in Correctional Facilities: An International Review

KEY WORDS: *drug interdiction, drug detecting canine, drug dog, drug detection, prison.*

What we looked at

Drug interdiction has been identified as a high priority area for CSC. One component of CSC's drug interdiction strategy is the Detector Dog program. Established in 2001, the program ensures that all CSC institutions have access to drug detecting canine units.

The current review examines the use of drug dogs internationally, discusses their benefits and limitations and examines existing research regarding their effectiveness in reducing drugs within prisons.

What we found

Two classes of drug dogs are available for use - active and passive (Gravett, 2000). Passive dogs are used on a collar with a handler to search inmates and visitors alike. Active drug dogs are not used to search people, but instead are allowed off their leash to search buildings, hallways, and outside perimeters. A number of agencies around the world train drug-detecting dogs, with the most common pedigrees of dogs being Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, and German Short Hair Pointers (US Department of Justice, 2000).

Dogs are trained for CSC by the Canada Border Service Agency under the Detector Dog Learning Service (CBSA, 2006). With the exception of one dog, all dogs trained by CBSA are Passive drug dogs. CBSA uses Labrador Retrievers for narcotics detection.

The use of canines in correctional facilities is beneficial in that they are less likely to detect minute traces of a substance as compared to trace detecting devices (US Department of Justice, 2000). Drug dogs can be trained to detect any type of drug, however, nine substances appears to be the maximum limit for appropriate detection for any one dog. Drug dogs are limited in their capacity to work long hours and require a break each hour.

Although many jurisdictions including Canada, the United States, Britain, and Australia employ drug detecting canine units, there is little known empirical evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of this type of intervention. However, what is available indicates that these dogs are capable of detecting drugs (Black et al., 2004; CBSA, 2006; US Department of Justice, 2000).

The only available evidence for the effectiveness of drug dogs in reducing drug importation and smuggling in a correctional environment is anecdotal. Many correctional employees believe that the mere presence of dogs in facilities may serve as

deterrent against drug smuggling. (Black et al., 2004; US Department of Justice, 2000; Gravett, 2000). What remains unclear is the false positive and false negative rates. The authors could locate only one report documenting rate of detection of drugs by detector canines (New South Wales Ombudsman, 2008). This report, which occurred in a police detection context, revealed that 23% of indications by a drug dog resulted in a seizure of drugs. Furthermore, the costs and benefits of utilizing a drug dog in the attempt to detect drugs within prisons also remain unclear.

The paucity of supporting evidence for interdiction techniques, such as drug dogs, may be partly due to the lack of pre-test or baseline data, as well as the complexity of interdiction initiatives that occur within correctional facilities. There are often many different interdiction interventions employed at one time making it difficult to isolate the effect of one intervention on the overall flow of drugs into prisons.

What it means

Overall, this review highlighted the lack of empirically-based information about the effectiveness of drug detection dogs within correctional facilities.

Additional well-controlled research studies that include pre- and post-implementation designs and a consistent method of data collection are needed to determine the overall effectiveness of detector dogs as a drug interdiction technique within correctional facilities.

References

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