

**Second Chances for Both Ends of the Leash:  
A Humane Approach to Juvenile Rehabilitation**

Payton Brianne, J.D., LL.M.  
Animal Law LL.M. Candidate at Lewis & Clark

## I. Introduction

In 2024 alone, approximately 334,000 dogs were euthanized in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, approximately 1.7 million juveniles are arrested annually<sup>2</sup> and nearly half of them reoffend before the age of 25.<sup>3</sup> These numbers represent two populations society often deems disposable, yet both are profoundly capable of change. What if, instead of giving up on them, we brought them together to help heal each other? What if we could give both parties a true second chance at life?

Empathy is fundamental for individuals to perceive and understand the emotional state of others. Empathy also heavily impacts our daily lives by affecting our decisions and actions.<sup>4</sup> It shapes how we relate to others, how we react to conflict, and how we navigate the moral choices that define who we are. Studies have shown that violent and psychopathic criminals are strongly associated with empathy linked brain regions that are smaller in size or less developed.<sup>5</sup> This biological link offers one explanation, but it's not the full story, because empathy isn't just innate. It's also learned.

Those confined during adolescence also frequently suffer with long-term mental health problems.<sup>6</sup> Incarceration during this critical stage of brain development can compound trauma rather than resolve it, creating ripple effects that extend far beyond release. We now know that the human brain does not fully mature until age 25. This lack of brain maturity makes

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter Animals Count, Explore the Data: Statistics 2024, <https://www.shelteranimalscount.org/explore-the-data/statistics-2024>.

<sup>2</sup> Gitnux, Juvenile Justice System Statistics, <https://gitnux.org/juvenile-justice-system-statistics/>

<sup>3</sup> Andrew J. Patton et al., Neurobiology of Empathy and Violence: A Review, 10 *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2022), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9285988/>.

<sup>4</sup> Laura A. Smith et al., Trauma, Empathy, and Juvenile Delinquency: A Neurodevelopmental Approach, 15 *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2021), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8355490/>.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> The Sentencing Project, *Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence* (2023), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/why-youth-incarceration-fails-an-updated-review-of-the-evidence/>.

lawbreaking and other risky behaviors more common during adolescence.<sup>7</sup> Adolescents are not simply miniature adults, they are neurologically and emotionally distinct, which demands a justice response rooted in development, not just discipline.

Studies find that youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system are several times more likely than other youth to have suffered trauma, or adverse childhood experiences, while growing up.<sup>8</sup> This overlap between trauma and system involvement is not a coincidence. It suggests that what we often label as “delinquent behavior” may, in fact, be a survival response. To break the cycle, we must respond not only to what these youth have done, but also to what they’ve endured. Among the most effective and well-regarded interventions for justice-involved youth is diversion. Unlike incarceration, which often reinforces trauma and stigma, diversion programs are associated with lower recidivism and significantly better outcomes in both behavioral and emotional development.<sup>9</sup>

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), a Pennsylvania based youth serving organization, offers intensive support and advocacy to 20,000 justice-involved or otherwise at-risk youth and young adults each year in more than 100 program sites across the country. Studies of the program have found that participating in YAP reduces involvement in the justice system, improves young people’s well being, and costs less than incarceration. The agency reports that only 3% of participants are adjudicated or convicted of a new offense while in the program.<sup>10</sup> YAP’s success shows that when we invest in relationships, community, and empathy driven support, young people thrive. But YAP also reveals a larger truth: when we center connection, not correction, we change trajectories.

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<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> Youth Advocate Programs, <https://www.yapinc.org/>.

Animal-assisted empathy training, combined with data on juvenile justice and shelter euthanasia is where Empathy for Animals emerges. This is an evidence based solution with humane impact. Spain's SOS Galgos shelter has successfully integrated a similar solution in which rescued greyhounds are included in school based "empathy classes". Their findings show that structured interactions inspired children, many of whom initially feared dogs, to develop greater compassion and even fostered intent to adopt rather than buy pets moving forward.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in Scotland, the Scottish SPCA Animal Guardians program has shown measurable empathy gains among youth who were referred for harmful behavior toward animals.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, rigorous clinical trials confirm the power of dog based interventions: in a randomized controlled study of incarcerated teenagers, all youth who took part in a 10 week canine assisted therapy program, whether they trained or simply walked the dogs, exhibited statistically significant increases in empathic concern.<sup>13</sup> These findings highlight the idea that direct interaction with rescue dogs, especially those who have experienced trauma themselves, can foster deep emotional learning. Empathy for Animals builds on this foundation by pairing justice-involved youth with rescue dogs, integrating trauma-informed reflection, hands on care, and educational modules to strengthen empathy, emotional regulation, and social responsibility—precisely what traditional diversion programs lack.

Empathy for Animals is a proposed canine-assisted diversion program designed to reach youth in the justice system, particularly those involved in behavioral or low level violent offenses. At its core, the program leverages the unique human-animal bond as a vehicle for

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<sup>11</sup> SOS Galgos, Contact for Schools, <https://www.sosgalgos.org/en/contact-for-schools>.

<sup>12</sup> Liam Corless, Record Number of Children Referred to Anti-Animal Cruelty Scheme, The Times (Scotland) (May 12, 2023), <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/record-number-of-children-referred-to-anti-animal-cruelty-scheme-mlq0qc26d>.

<sup>13</sup> Rebekah Roulier et al., Animal-Assisted Interventions for Juvenile Offenders: A Review, 12 Journal of Juvenile Justice 22 (2019), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6430139/>.

emotional growth, reflection, and rehabilitation. Participants engage in a structured curriculum that includes guided interactions with rescue dogs, hands on animal care, and trauma-informed lessons in empathy, responsibility, and emotional regulation. Rather than focusing on punishment or even traditional cognitive-behavioral correction, Empathy for Animals seeks to build prosocial skills through compassionate action. The dogs involved are themselves survivors, all of which are pulled from overcrowded shelters' euthanasia lists, positioning them as both companions and co-teachers in a mutually healing process. The program is grounded in developmental psychology and supported by a growing body of research showing that empathy can be taught and that early interventions reduce recidivism. Empathy for Animals does not aim to "treat animal abusers," but instead to reach vulnerable youth before cruelty or callousness takes root, providing both ends of the leash a second chance.

## **II. Empathy, Youth, and Violence**

Empathy, at its core, is a pillar of social and moral development. Psychologists typically distinguish between affective empathy, which involves sharing another's feelings, and cognitive empathy, the capacity to understand someone else's perspective.<sup>14</sup> This distinction is especially important when working with justice-involved youth, many of whom may intellectually understand right from wrong but struggle to emotionally connect with the impact of their actions. Legal scholars recognize empathy as a powerful moderator of harmful conduct, shaping moral judgments and informing accountability.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing this link helps explain why empathy based interventions are gaining traction, not only in schools and therapy, but also in alternative

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Decety et al., The complex relation between morality and empathy, 18 Trends in Cognitive Sci. 337 (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Zahn-Waxler et al., Development of Concern for Others, 32 Develop. Psychol. 200 (1992).

justice programs aimed at rehabilitation over retribution. Yet empathy does not always develop naturally, especially under conditions of trauma.

To understand why these interventions are necessary, we must first examine what disrupts empathy in the lives of vulnerable youth. Adverse childhood experiences (“ACEs”), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, have been shown to undermine empathy development. Youth with elevated ACE scores tend to exhibit lower empathic concern and struggle with emotional expression.<sup>16</sup> Traumatized adolescents are also disproportionately represented in juvenile justice populations, with multiple ACEs correlating to higher rates of reoffending.<sup>17</sup> A recent meta-analysis found that each additional ACE increased the odds of juvenile reoffending by 4.4%, and that improvements in empathy significantly buffered this risk.<sup>18</sup> These findings reinforce what many in the juvenile justice field already suspect: when young people are denied safe, empathetic environments, they often struggle to extend empathy to others.

Racial and socioeconomic disparities in the juvenile justice system further complicate the path to rehabilitation. Black and Hispanic youth are significantly more likely to be arrested, detained, and formally processed than their white peers, even when charged with similar offenses.<sup>19</sup> These disparities reflect not only systemic bias but also a failure to provide equitable access to early intervention services. Community based, empathy driven programs, particularly

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<sup>16</sup> Ana V. Antunes et al., *Adverse Childhood Experiences and Empathy: The Role of Interparental Conflict*, *Med. Sci. Forum* (2021).

<sup>17</sup> *Examining the Relationship Between ACEs and Juvenile Recidivism: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* (2022).

<sup>18</sup> National Elf Service, *ACEs Increase Risk of Juvenile Reoffending* (2023).

<sup>19</sup> Joshua Rovner, *Racial Disparities in Youth Incarceration Persist*, *The Sentencing Project* (2021), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/racial-disparities-in-youth-incarceration-persist/>.

those that build trust through shared vulnerability, may be uniquely positioned to serve marginalized populations that have historically been alienated by punitive systems.<sup>20</sup>

Research consistently links low empathy to aggressive and antisocial behaviors. In adolescents, diminished empathic capacity predicts early onset of conduct problems, including property offenses, assaults, and even animal cruelty.<sup>21</sup> A recent study of serious juvenile offenders found that lower empathy was significantly associated with higher rates of violent and externalizing behaviors, with empathy deficits frequently rooted in early trauma.<sup>22</sup> However, this doesn't mean the trajectory is fixed. Despite trauma and neurodevelopmental challenges, empathy is malleable— especially when addressed early.

Empathy based interventions in juvenile justice, ranging from counseling to animal-assisted programs, have been shown to reduce recidivism and promote prosocial behavior.<sup>23</sup> These aren't just promising numbers to us, they reflect a shift in how we think about accountability: not as punishment, but as an opportunity for emotional growth. One controlled study revealed that youth whose empathy increased during treatment were less likely to reoffend, even when initial ACE exposure was high.<sup>24</sup> Similar findings emerge from programs emphasizing perspective-taking and emotional regulation, which consistently show reductions in aggressive behavior and improved social outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Empathy is a skill that, once cultivated, can alter the trajectory of a young person's life for the better.

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<sup>20</sup> Kristin N. Henning, *The Rage of Innocence: How America Criminalizes Black Youth* 227–32 (2021).

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Miller & Nancy Eisenberg, *The relation between empathy and antisocial behavior: A meta-analysis*, SAGE.

<sup>22</sup> *Empathy in Detained Male Juvenile Offenders*, Walden Univ. Dissertation

<sup>23</sup> Neema Trivedi-Bateman et al., *Optimal Application of Empathy Interventions to Reduce Antisocial Behaviour and Crime*, *Psychology, Crime & Law* (2021).

<sup>24</sup> Narvey, Baglivio et al., *Interrelationship Between Empathy and ACEs*.

<sup>25</sup> Kimberly Schonert-Reichl et al., *Promoting Children's Prosocial Behaviors in School: Impact of the "Roots of Empathy" Program*, *School Mental Health* (2011).

These insights lay the theoretical and empirical foundation for Empathy for Animals, a program that harnesses experiential learning (via rescue dogs) to build cognitive and affective empathy during a developmental window when it still can change trajectories.

### **III. Problems with Current Juvenile Interventions**

Despite decades of reform efforts, most juvenile justice interventions remain reactive rather than rehabilitative. Generic anger management classes and probationary supervision are common court responses, yet these approaches rarely address the emotional and developmental roots of a young person's behavior. They may teach rule compliance, but they do not teach empathy. This gap between behavior correction and emotional understanding is where many interventions fall short, and it's a gap juveniles often carry with them long after their court supervision ends.

More significantly, punitive interventions like detention or out-of-home placement don't just fail to heal emotional wounds, they often make them worse, which fosters a deeper sense of isolation, mistrust, and internalized shame. Research shows that incarceration, particularly for low level offenses, increases the likelihood of reoffending rather than reducing it.<sup>26</sup> Detention facilities have also been associated with negative psychological outcomes, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>27</sup> In the absence of meaningful therapeutic support, these environments risk entrenching the very behaviors they are meant to correct and too often, what starts as a brief stay becomes the beginning of a cycle.

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth S. Scott & Laurence Steinberg, *Adolescent Development and the Regulation of Youth Crime*, 18 *The Future of Children* 15, 22–23 (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas J. Dishion & Elizabeth A. Stormshak, *Intervening in Children's Lives: An Ecological, Family-Centered Approach to Mental Health Care* 126–28 (2007); Barry Holman & Jason Ziedenberg, *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities*, Justice Policy Inst. (2006), <https://justicepolicy.org/research/the-dangers-of-detention/>.



Even diversionary programs that avoid incarceration often prioritize behavioral compliance over emotional growth.<sup>28</sup> Youth may learn what not to do, but not why they acted out or how to respond differently next time. Emotional education, namely empathy building, is often seen as peripheral or idealistic, rather than central to rehabilitation. Yet if we are serious about reducing harm, we must begin teaching the emotional tools that prevent it. Programs that foster empathy, emotional regulation, and perspective taking can fill a critical gap left by traditional interventions, especially when introduced early and delivered with consistency.

This is where programs like Empathy for Animals offer a meaningful shift. Rather than focusing on external compliance, the program centers around internal transformation. At its core, the goal is to meet youth where they are, emotionally and developmentally, just like the rescue dogs they work with. Some of these juveniles come in hungry for someone to trust, while others arrive guarded, fearful, or withdrawn and healing from invisible wounds. The same can be said for our canine partners. Some arrive healthy and social while others need time, medical care, or behavior support from their invisible wounds. Both deserve patience, structure, and compassion. Empathy for Animals creates a space where both dog and juvenile can show up imperfect and still be seen as worthy of growth. Unlike traditional sanctions, this approach gives youth space to reflect, connect, and grow. It addresses the “why” behind their behavior while nurturing the emotional tools that can help change it.

#### **IV. Why Animals? Why Now?**

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey A. Butts et al., Positive Youth Justice: Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development, Coal. for Juvenile Just. 4–6 (2010), <https://www.cclp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Positive-Youth-Justice-Framing-Justice-Interventions-Using-the-Concepts-of-Positive-Youth-Development.pdf>.

The use of animals in therapeutic and educational settings is not new, but it is increasingly supported by empirical evidence. Animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) have been shown to reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and enhance social functioning among youth and adults alike.<sup>29</sup> In particular, dogs, due to their responsiveness, ability to form bonds, and consistent presence, are uniquely suited for this work.<sup>30</sup>

Programs like Pawsitive Change, Puppies Behind Bars, and the PATH International Equine-Assisted Services provide compelling models. Pawsitive Change, which pairs incarcerated individuals with rescue dogs for intensive training programs, has reported reduced disciplinary infractions, increased prosocial behavior, and recidivism rates far below the national average.<sup>31</sup> Puppies Behind Bars follows a similar framework, involving incarcerated individuals in training service dogs for veterans and first responders. Participants in these programs often describe the dogs as catalysts for self-reflection, accountability, and emotional healing.<sup>32</sup> Equine programs, like those offered through PATH Intl., have shown consistent benefits for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders, including improved self-esteem, increased trust, and reduced aggression.<sup>33</sup>

The science behind these outcomes is rooted in neurobiology. Interacting with animals has been found to increase oxytocin (the so-called "bonding hormone") while reducing cortisol levels, a key indicator of stress.<sup>34</sup> These physiological changes promote emotional openness and

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<sup>29</sup> Marguerite E. O'Haire, Animal-Assisted Intervention for Trauma: A Systematic Literature Review, 66 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1152, 1152–67 (2015).

<sup>30</sup> Lori R. Kogan et al., Canine-Assisted Therapy in the Military: An Overview of Current Issues, 10 *U.S. Army Med. Dep't J.* 46, 46–52 (2012).

<sup>31</sup> Marley's Mutts Dog Rescue, Pawsitive Change Program, <https://www.pawsitivechangeprogram.org>.

<sup>32</sup> Puppies Behind Bars, About the Program, <https://www.puppiesbehindbars.com>.

<sup>33</sup> PATH Intl., Equine-Assisted Services: Research Summaries, <https://www.pathintl.org>.

<sup>34</sup> Andrea Beetz et al., Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions: The Possible Role of Oxytocin, 61 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1, 1–15 (2012).

make individuals more receptive to learning and connection. Youth in justice-involved settings often operate in a constant state of hypervigilance or emotional shutdown. Animals help lower these defenses, creating safer ground for growth.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the emotional safety that animals provide is both nonjudgmental and deeply relational. Unlike adults or authority figures, dogs offer affection without pretense, structure without punishment. For many participants, the animals are the first beings they've ever trusted. This bond fosters prosocial behavior not through force, but through connection.<sup>36</sup>

Animal-assisted programs also deliver reciprocal benefits: they allow humans to care for beings who are themselves vulnerable. In *Empathy for Animals*, every dog has a story. Many have survived neglect, abandonment, abuse, or near death experiences. This shared sense of survival deepens the emotional impact. As one juvenile participant in a related program shared, "I realized I wasn't the only one who'd been given up on".<sup>37</sup> This parallel opens the door to healing on both sides.

It's easy to dismiss programs like these as "soft", but the data (and subsequent outcomes) tell a different story. Animal-assisted interventions change behavior because they change relationships, starting with the one we have with ourselves. That kind of impact should be central to how we think about rehabilitation.

## **V. Program Proposal: Empathy for Animals for Juvenile Diversion**

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<sup>35</sup> Megan Mueller & Lisa Gunter, Human-Animal Interaction as a Strategy for Addressing Trauma Among Youth, 30 *Child & Adolescent Soc. Work J.* 97, 98–104 (2021).

<sup>36</sup> Leslie Irvine, *My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and Their Animals* 87–89 (2013).

<sup>37</sup> Rebekah Roulier et al., Transforming Trauma: How Animal-Assisted Programs Can Help Justice-Involved Youth Heal, 12 *J. Juvenile Justice* 22, 25–27 (2022).

Empathy for Animals is a trauma-informed, animal-assisted diversion program designed for justice-involved youth and young adults. The program can be offered voluntarily or as a condition of diversion or probation. Its core aim is to foster empathy, emotional regulation, and accountability through structured interactions with rescue dogs and guided therapeutic reflection.

Participants meet weekly over six sessions, either virtually or in person, and engage in activities that include journaling, group discussion, basic dog handling, and exposure to real life stories of canine survival and resilience. Each session is carefully designed to mirror stages of personal growth— from recognizing empathy and understanding trauma to rebuilding trust and ultimately giving back. The curriculum was co-developed by a licensed mental health clinician and a legal professional with experience in both juvenile justice and animal welfare.

Week 1 introduces the concept of empathy through emotional literacy exercises and personal reflection. In Weeks 2 and 4, youth meet rescue dogs with powerful backstories who demonstrate resilience after recovery. These stories become springboards for discussion about vulnerability, compassion, and healing. Week 3 introduces trauma-informed care concepts and draws parallels between animal and human responses to stress. Week 5 challenges youth to reflect on personal responsibility through journaling and group discussion, and Week 6 is a culmination of everything they learned. This is done through a volunteer visit to a shelter or a creative contribution to animal welfare, such as making enrichment toys.

The program is tailored for individuals with behavioral or violent offenses. While originally designed for youth ages 12-17, feedback from local probation departments has led to an expansion of eligibility up to age 25, recognizing the developmental similarities and therapeutic needs of older adolescents and young adults.

Throughout the program, participants are not just asked to engage with dogs, but to reflect deeply on the emotions those animals represent: fear, survival, trust, and ultimately, transformation. The dogs, all of whom were once slated for euthanasia, serve as both companions and co-facilitators, modeling the possibility of recovery through care. By helping to rehabilitate and advocate for animals, participants simultaneously engage in their own healing, a reciprocal process that reframes both behavior and identity.

Evaluation will be critical to the program's success and replicability. Empathy for Animals will implement a multi-modal tracking system including participant self report surveys, caregiver and probation feedback, and follow up data on recidivism and school reengagement. These metrics will allow for continuous improvement and contribute to the broader body of research on animal-assisted justice interventions.

Empathy for Animals fills a unique gap in diversion programming: it centers around emotional education while grounding itself in psychological, legal, and humane principles. It does not attempt to “fix” youth through punishment, but rather to engage them through relationship, responsibility, and compassion.

## **VI. Legal, Ethical, and Programmatic Framework**

Empathy for Animals is designed to operate in full compliance with state and local juvenile diversion statutes, many of which explicitly support alternatives to incarceration that address underlying behavioral, developmental, or mental health challenges.<sup>38</sup> Diversion programs are often authorized under state juvenile codes that allow courts or probation departments to refer

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 654 (authorizing informal probation and diversion programs); Tex. Fam. Code § 52.031 (authorizing first offender programs); N.M. Stat. Ann. § 32A-2-7(B)(5) (permitting referral to community-based diversion services).

youth to community based services when such referrals are deemed to promote rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.<sup>39</sup> Programs like Empathy for Animals, which combine educational, therapeutic, and pro-social engagement, fall squarely within the intended purpose of these statutes. This program was designed not necessarily to push the boundaries of what's possible under the law, but to fulfill the law's highest aspirations: rehabilitation, not retribution.

The program also follows best practices in trauma-informed care, which emphasize safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment.<sup>40</sup> Facilitators are trained to recognize signs of trauma, avoid re-traumatization, and create emotionally safe environments where youth can reflect without fear of punishment or shame.<sup>41</sup> This approach is particularly critical given the high incidence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among justice-involved youth and the strong correlation between trauma exposure and future offending.<sup>42</sup>

Empathy must be modeled, not just taught, and that begins with how we treat the animals who make this work possible. On the canine side, strict safety and welfare protocols are in place. All dogs used in the program are temperament-tested, vaccinated, and medically cleared before participation. Sessions are supervised by a dog handler, and youth are never left alone with animals.<sup>43</sup> Group sizes are kept small to allow for individualized guidance and maintain a calm, structured setting. The dog handler is tasked with monitoring dog behavior closely for signs of

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<sup>39</sup> See Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Diversion from Formal Juvenile Court Processing, OJJDP Model Programs Guide, <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov>.

<sup>40</sup> Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Admin., SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884 (2014).

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> Natalie J. Kaczorowski et al., Adverse Childhood Experiences and Recidivism in a Sample of Juvenile Offenders, 27 *J. Child & Adolescent Trauma* 1, 1–12 (2020).

<sup>43</sup> American Veterinary Medical Association, Guidelines for the Use of Animals in Therapy and Education, <https://www.avma.org>.

stress, and animals are never forced to interact. The emotional well-being of the dogs is treated with the same care and intentionality as that of the youth participants.

Additional safeguards include a participant screening process that specifies all individuals with a known history of animal cruelty or severe interpersonal violence. All youth are supervised by trained facilitators and program staff, and a clear code of conduct is introduced at the outset of the program. In-person sessions are conducted in secure environments, such as school classrooms, community centers, or probation buildings, and parental or legal guardian consent is required.

By combining trauma-informed, legally sound, and ethically responsible practices, Empathy for Animals ensures that the emotional and physical safety of all participants, human and canine alike, is never compromised. This framework is not only vital for legal compliance and public trust but also reinforces the program's core mission: to model empathy through action and accountability.

## **VII. Limitations and Responses**

While Empathy for Animals presents a compassionate, evidence informed alternative to punitive juvenile interventions, no program is without questions or potential limitations. Critics may raise valid concerns about safety, scalability, and long term efficacy. However, existing data from analogous programs provide compelling responses to these challenges.

One frequently voiced concern involves the safety of involving dogs in justice programs. The worry is twofold: potential harm to participants and potential mistreatment of animals. But programs like Puppies Behind Bars, Pawsitive Change, and Animal Guardians have

implemented robust protocols that ensure mutual safety and respect.<sup>44</sup> These initiatives use professional trainers, supervised sessions, and strict behavioral guidelines, all of which are mirrored in Empathy for Animals. Incidents are rare, and in many cases, the presence of animals has been shown to reduce aggression rather than incite it.<sup>45</sup>

Others may question whether trauma-informed, empathy based programs are scalable or cost effective. While these models often require upfront investment in training and supervision, the long term savings are substantial. Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), which emphasizes individualized support and diversion from incarceration, reports that only 3% of its participants reoffend while enrolled.<sup>46</sup> The cost of incarceration (averaging \$588 per day per youth) far exceeds the cost of community based alternatives.<sup>47</sup> Scaling trauma-informed approaches is not only possible but financially prudent.

Concerns about the durability of empathy gains are also worth addressing. Can empathy really be taught and retained? Research indicates that it can. A randomized controlled trial on canine assisted therapy for incarcerated youth found statistically significant increases in empathy over a 10-week period, even in participants with high ACE scores.<sup>48</sup> Other programs show similar outcomes, with gains in emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and social behavior sustained over time.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Puppies Behind Bars, About the Program, <https://www.puppiesbehindbars.com>; Marley's Mutts Dog Rescue, Pawsitive Change Program, <https://www.pawsitivechangeprogram.org>; Scottish SPCA, Animal Guardians, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/record-number-of-children-referred-to-anti-animal-cruelty-scheme-mlq0qc26d>.

<sup>45</sup> Megan Mueller & Lisa Gunter, Human-Animal Interaction as a Strategy for Addressing Trauma Among Youth, 30 Child & Adolescent Soc. Work J. 97, 98–104 (2021).

<sup>46</sup> Youth Advocate Programs, About YAP, <https://www.yapinc.org>.

<sup>47</sup> The Sentencing Project, Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence (2024), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/why-youth-incarceration-fails-an-updated-review-of-the-evidence>.

<sup>48</sup> Marguerite E. O'Haire, Animal-Assisted Intervention for Trauma: A Systematic Literature Review, 66 Frontiers in Psychology 1152, 1152–67 (2015).

<sup>49</sup> Rebekah Roulier et al., Transforming Trauma: How Animal-Assisted Programs Can Help Justice-Involved Youth Heal, 12 J. Juvenile Justice 22, 25–27 (2022).



Empathy for Animals incorporates these best practices: structured curricula, expert facilitators, regular evaluation, and clearly defined participant status. Every element is trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in evidence. The emotional safety of the dogs and the youth is prioritized equally, reflecting a belief that healing is most effective when it's mutual.

While skepticism is natural, especially when innovation is involved, the evidence supporting this model is powerful. With adequate oversight, training, and infrastructure, Empathy for Animals is not only feasible but urgently needed.

## **VIII. Broader Implications**

The Empathy for Animals model, while rooted in juvenile diversion, offers a scalable and adaptable framework that extends well beyond the justice system. With slight curricular adjustments, the program can be implemented in public schools, foster care systems, and community based organizations that serve at-risk youth. The core components: empathy building, trauma-informed engagement, and structured interactions with rescue dogs, are flexible enough to meet the needs of various populations while remaining grounded in evidence based practices.

Nonprofit organizations, particularly those with experience in animal rescue or youth services, are well positioned to lead this work. Compassionate Canine Society, for instance, draws on its dual mission of rescue and rehabilitation to provide both the canine and educational components necessary for implementation. By maintaining relationships with trainers, therapists, and youth justice professionals, such organizations can serve as a bridge between systems, delivering curriculum with integrity while ensuring animal welfare is never compromised.

The financial implications are also worth noting. According to The Sentencing Project, incarcerating a young person in a juvenile facility costs an average of \$588 per day, or over \$200,000 per year.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, community based programs, particularly those that leverage existing nonprofit infrastructure, can operate at a fraction of that cost. Moreover, early interventions that reduce recidivism yield long term savings by decreasing future court involvement, incarceration, and reliance on social services.<sup>51</sup> Even modest improvements in empathy and behavior can compound into significant social and economic benefits over time.

This program also creates opportunities for interspecies empathy to become a broader cultural value. Teaching young people to care for the most vulnerable dogs, many of whom were discarded or abused, models a form of justice that is compassionate, responsive, and healing. In a society that often divides human and animal welfare into separate silos, Empathy for Animals reminds us that care is not zero sum. When we uplift one, we uplift all.

Lastly, beyond its impact on youth, the program also advances animal welfare goals. The dogs involved are pulled from shelters where they faced euthanasia and potentially other neglectful or abusive situations, and the structured engagement provides both socialization and second chances. Studies show that shelter dogs placed in training or therapy roles experience improved adoption outcomes and behavioral stability.<sup>52</sup> The program, therefore, advocates not only for youth reform but for the humane treatment and visibility of rescue animals.

## **IX. Conclusion**

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<sup>50</sup> The Sentencing Project, *Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence* 5 (2023), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Why-Youth-Incarceration-Fails.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Youth Advocate Programs, Inc., *Social Return on Investment Summary* (2018),

[https://www.yapinc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Resources/YAP\\_SROI\\_ExecSummary\\_2018.pdf](https://www.yapinc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Resources/YAP_SROI_ExecSummary_2018.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Emily Weiss et al., *Assessing the Impact of Dog Training Programs on Shelter Dogs' Adoption Outcomes*, 12 *Animals* 87, 90–93 (2022), <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/12/1/87>.

Empathy for Animals is more than a novel intervention— it is a legally sound, psychologically informed, and ethically grounded response to a complex social issue. Rather than treating cruelty after it manifests, this program seeks to nurture empathy before harm occurs. It leverages the power of the human animal bond to foster connection, responsibility, and growth in youth who are too often written off.

At a time when both shelter animals and justice-involved youth face steep odds, Empathy for Animals proposes a shared solution, one that heals on both ends of the leash. By investing early, working collaboratively, and grounding our responses in compassion, we can disrupt cycles of harm and open the door to transformation. These second chances aren't just possible, they're necessary.