

# Helping criminal justice system users: Utilising specially trained dogs

Dr. Elizabeth Spruin & Dr. Katarina Mozova  
Susanna Mitchell, Nicole Holt, Dr. Anke Franz, Dr. Ana Fernandez

## CONTEXT

### The journey through the Criminal Justice System

- The reporting of crime → Police investigation (interviewing of defendants, victims, witnesses) → Trial (giving evidence)

### The problem

- Secondary victimization as part of the process (Gekoski, Adler & Gray, 2013)
- Psychological reactions during interviewing/giving evidence similar to when event was occurring (Courthouse Dogs Foundation, 2015)
- Most affected are those most vulnerable: children, the elderly, those with mental health issues, victims of specific crimes (e.g. sexual assault, domestic violence)

### What works

- Procedural justice – fair treatment and access to services more important in regard to satisfaction than outcome of case (Wedlock & Tapley, 2014); current services are inconsistent

### Interviews/giving evidence and support

- Support is available (e.g. pre-trial visit to court, home visit, court supporter for young people, able to carry comfort items, etc.) BUT contact with a living creature is impossible – this type of contact seems to best help in extremely difficult situations

### Improving CJS response

- Ceeny (2015) Chief Executive of HM Courts and Tribunal Services: real desire to make CJS truly better for all users
- Need for improved services and support for vulnerable individuals (Government Justice Reform Policy, 2015) and Victims (Code of Practice for Victims, 2015)
- Emphasis on work with partners to provide better support for court users (HM Courts & Tribunals Service Business Plan (2015))

### Therapy dog vs Facility Dog

- *Therapy dog* – personal pet that has passed temperament assessment by vet, no formal training required for handler or dog.
- *Facility dog* – graduate from an Assistance Dog International (ADI) program (2 years), part of a breeding program, handler trained by an ADI organization, working dog → suitable to be *in* courtroom or present *during* police interviews

## USING SPECIALLY TRAINED DOGS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

- No empirical evidence available to date
- Limited evidence suggests:
  - Support beneficial *throughout* the process, from initial interviews to post-court support
  - Support beneficial with a variety of populations, including vulnerable adult victims (Ullman, 2007); children of different ages (Parish-Plass, 2008)
  - The use of dogs provided comfort for victims (Holder, 2013), impacted on their perceived stress (Herzog, 2010) and increased relaxation and happiness (Dellinger, 2009; Holton, 2015)
  - Animate touch relates to increased sense of wellbeing, decreased anxiety, lower heart rate, increased speech and memory functions, heightened mental clarity, Justice, 2007; Sandoval, 2010; Stephens, 2011)
- The Courthouse Dogs Foundation was founded in 2003 and is an advocate for using specially trained *facility* dogs in the Criminal Justice Setting, continuously collecting success stories
- Routinely used in the USA, Canada, and more

## THE CURRENT PROJECT

Introduction of a *therapy dog* during the pre-trial process at Medway Magistrate Court for court users

**AIM:** Does the presence of a therapy dog have an impact on the wellbeing of CJS users from the court users' and staff perspectives?

**METHOD:** Predominantly qualitative semi-structured interviews surrounding the subjective experiences of CJS users through their interaction with the therapy dog and perceptions of staff.

### PRELIMINARY RESPONSES FROM PRE-TRIAL PROCESS STUDY:

- Service offered to defendants and their support (50% actively engaged); victims/witnesses and their support (90% actively engaged)
- 104 qualitative interviews conducted with court users
  - 63 women, 41 men ( $M = 39$ ;  $SD = 14.6$ )
- **97 individuals** felt *at least* some difference due to Poppy's presence
- **All individuals** perceived introducing this service to courts can be beneficial

## INTRODUCING POPPY



- NO facility dogs in this context available in the UK
- Poppy is PAT certified and further trained by handler

Liz.spruin@canterbury.ac.uk; Katarina.mozova@canterbury.ac.uk

References available upon request

"it just brings a little calmness and just stroking her, it's lovely" #67

"I'm smiling now, it's so nice just stroking her, this made me really happy" #83

"My stomach was in knots for the last hour and since stroking her, the knots have gone!" #27

I really wanted to see her when I heard she's in. I came on the right day, I'm glad she's here, it's helping, I feel better #57

"she's happy, calm, content, so it translates to you" #43

## NEXT STEPS

- Case study approach following especially vulnerable individuals throughout the CJS process
- Introduction of a therapy dog to pre-police interviews
- Acquiring a **facility dog** and creating an evidence-base for the use of facility dogs and therapy dogs throughout the CJS process