

Featured Felines: Miscellany 19 (2023)

(page checked July 2026)

Cats in Prisons – older news



At the Pocahontas Correctional Unit – see below

Much of the information here comes from the United States, and from the late 1990s and early 2000s; there is some later information at the end of the document. There had been colonies of feral or semi-feral cats at many prisons for a long time, and sadly it seems that whenever someone wanted to be rid of a cat, for whatever reason, dumping it on prison grounds was a common practice. And quite often the prison authorities, faced with possibly hundreds of feral and stray cats, simply had them killed.

But two things began to change. It was realised that allowing inmates to care for a cat could be beneficial to both parties: the cat had someone to look after it, and the prisoner had companionship and the responsibility of having another living being to care for, other than themselves. Inmates often became very attached to their felines. The other thing that changed was the gradual realisation that TNR – the process of Trap–Neuter–Return – was a better way of dealing with the cat populations than just exterminating them, when after a while they would simply rebound. And of course prisons benefit from being kept rodent-free, particularly their grain stores.

There follows some information on specific prisons, gleaned from the internet and largely from archived sites, and some generic photos probably mostly taken in the Indiana State Prison.



The Indiana State Prison



Reporting the bad news first, in the early 2000s a TNR programme had been established at **Avenal State Prison**, near Fresno in California, to deal with the problem of what were then hundreds of cats. Volunteers, vets and inmates worked tirelessly to treat the cats, while dozens of kittens were removed, hand-reared if necessary, spayed/neutered, and eventually adopted out to families. Feeding and watering stations had been built and maintained by the inmates for the remaining cats, and there was even a well-tended graveyard for those that died (*below*).

Then the warden was replaced by another who seems to have taken against the cats. During her watch dozens were killed or injured, and some were even shut in under a building so that they starved to death. Feeding stations were destroyed, and she ordered the graveyard to be bulldozed, claiming that it was against a county ordinance to bury animals there, which was a lie; the grounds were on state land and not subject to county rules.

Things improved after 2007, when a new and more enlightened warden took over, and the TNR programme was re-established and the cats were cared for again. Full story [here](#) (2009 - *archived copy*).



The beautiful graveyard before it was destroyed
by Warden Mendoza-Powers

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Convincing authority of the benefits of cats in prisons isn't always an easy task. At the **Bath Institution**, a medium-security prison near Kingston in Ontario, Canada, a problem arose. In 2006 a feral colony of cats had been on the prison premises - probably for the last 20 years or so - when the prison officials decided that the cats had to go. This was a blow for both the cats, which risked being put down, and for the inmates, who loved them. The prisoners circulated a petition to keep the cats, and gained 300 signatures from a population of 345 inmates. As cat eviction time drew near, the inmates became more and more upset. The situation was getting out of hand.

Fortunately Mary Shaw, a veterinary technician in Kingston and the director of the Spay Neuter Kingston Initiative, became involved. With help from Suzanne Stevenson, a retired former worker, she persuaded the prison officials to allow the cats to stay. Since then the cats received veterinary care, and special year-round shelters were installed on the prison grounds for the felines to live in during the winter. The prisoners were happy and the cats thrived.

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In 2010 trusted inmates from the **Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women** in the Perth area of Western Australia, while not having cats at the prison, were going out to assist with various duties, including interacting with the cats, at the charity shelter [Cat Haven](#) (*july 2010 – archived copy*). They worked hard, found it rewarding and it helped to prepare them for life back in the outside world. The charity was very grateful for their help.

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Gwinnett County is in the north of the US state of Georgia and is part of the Atlanta metropolitan area. In 2010 the **Gwinnett County Detention Center** introduced a partnership between the county sheriff's department and the Society of Humane Friends of Georgia, whereby male inmates could adopt dogs. In 2013 the program was expanded to allow female inmates to adopt kittens from the Humane Society, mostly rescue ones that were due to be euthanized.

As with other such programs, the women benefited from the companionship of the kittens, who of course were saved from death and had someone to look after them. I don't know whether the program is still in operation, but there's a [Facebook](#) page devoted mostly to the dogs, with the occasional post about cats, and that was still being used on and off in May 2024. [Life with Cats](#) (Nov. 2013)



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One could say the cats themselves started the program at the maximum-security **Indiana State Prison** in Michigan City, IN by, over the years, entering one by one through the bars at the entrance gate and depositing litters of kittens, which the inmates cared for. Now the program is formalised, and there's a local animal shelter that works with the prison; it can provide a new companion when one of the inmates' cats dies from natural causes.

The administration is all in favour of the cat program, which brings great benefits to the inmates, many of whom are murderers and hardened criminals. They adore their cats, who they say change their lives, calm their anger, bring them love and teach them responsibility. They also know that if they get into trouble, they will likely not be allowed to keep their cat. They are responsible for all their cat's expenses – food, litter, vet bills – which they earn through work programs or receive as support from their families, so the scheme costs the prison almost nothing. Staff always have an eye open for the safety of the cats, but it's very rare for a cat to be harmed. There's a long blog article, including interviews with prison inmates, [here](#) (May 2007 – archived copy).



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In 2005 male inmates at the **Kentucky State Prison** in Eddyville were reported as caring for 15 homeless cats, as well as running an adoption program.

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There were cats at the **Lorton Correctional Complex**, aka the Lorton Reformatory, in Virginia for many years, up to 500 of them at one point, and some were being euthanized. When they learned of that in 1993, several local volunteer organisations stepped up to try to improve matters with a TNR programme to keep the population in check, and by rehoming some of them.

At the time Lorton was one of the few American prisons to allow pets, and a number of the cats were looked after by inmates, who cared for them deeply and took their responsibilities very seriously. Cats were in three categories: 'walk cats', who didn't respond to anyone; 'yard cats', who stayed outside and were looked after collectively; and 'dorm cats', who belonged to particular inmates. One inmate, a paraplegic, had been feeding the outdoor cats for eight years, going around in his wheelchair every morning with a bucket of dry cat food (and a cat) on his lap to various stops where the cats congregated. There's an interesting article [here](#) (June 1999) about some of the inmates and their cats.

The prison closed in late 2001, so the volunteers had to step up their efforts to trap all the cats and find new homes for them. Inmates mostly had to leave their beloved pets behind, as if they were to be transferred elsewhere the cats wouldn't have been able to accompany them.



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From around 2005 the **New Hampshire State Prison for Women** in Goffstown was running a program whereby inmates took in feral kittens from the Animal Rescue League of Bedford, NH, in order to socialise them. The kittens could then be returned to the League and were ready for adoption. As well as giving the inmates something to care for and be responsible for, it worked well because they were there the whole time, so the kittens could be 'flooded' with socialisation, and would usually be ready for rehoming in a matter of weeks. The League paid for food and all necessary supplies, so the program didn't cost the taxpayer anything. Inmates were screened to ensure they were ready for the time and responsibility involved, and they had to take an intensive veterinary science course. The program was successful, with well over 90 per cent of the kittens being ready for adoption afterwards. More details [here](#) (July 2007 – archived copy).

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In the 1970s the **Oklahoma State Penitentiary** in McAlester had many cats that frequented the place, but one who stood out and was known to everyone was '**Old Canteen Tom**'. He was a very large, striped cat, battle-scarred and with half an ear missing, who ruled over all the others; none could beat him in a fight. He was liked and respected by the inmates, and when he required some dental work they chipped in and paid for his treatment. At canteen time, the men would feed him and the other cats. The guards turned a blind eye to inmates having small pets, of which there was quite a variety, including kittens.

Old Tom was featured in newspapers in Oklahoma in his time, and when he became too old and feeble for the rough and tumble of prison life he was taken in by one of the prison staff to live out his days in peace. There's an article about him [here](#) (2007 – archived copy), written by a former inmate.



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In June 2009 Animal Care and Control, a shelter in Anderson, Indiana, sent 60 cats to live in the grounds of the **Pendleton Correctional Industrial Facility**. It would be better for the cats than being confined to a cage at the shelter, and they would receive much more attention and socialisation there and hence a better chance of later being adopted. Had they remained at the shelter, they would likely have been euthanized, as it was overwhelmed with the number of cats coming in.

A selected group of the prison inmates would care for the cats, and the program – called Nine Lives – had support from the highest levels – even the Governor of Indiana. To start with there were six inmates in the group, and they worked eight-hour shifts looking after the cats; that was their job. In return they were able to bond with the felines, and it gave them a purpose and an opportunity to give back something to society. They might later even be able to adopt one themselves. The prison staff supported the program too, with some doing volunteer work at the shelter or adopting a cat themselves. See articles [here](#) (July 2009 – archived copy; scroll down) and [here](#) (Sept. 2011 – archived copy), and later news below.

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The **Pocahontas Correctional Unit** in Chesterfield, Virginia in 2005 took in a number of cats and kittens rescued from the aftermath of the devastating hurricane Katrina. There was already a program at the prison for socialising abandoned cats, but at the time it had just five felines. Then 24 hurricane survivors arrived, stressed and scared, after a 20-hour truck ride from an overcrowded shelter in Mississippi. They were soon being showered with food, medicine and love, and the inmates found the task of caring for them very rewarding. There's an article [here](#) (Oct. 2005 – archived copy), and the image at the head of this article shows three of the Pocahontas inmates with rescued kittens.



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After Nelson Mandela had left his incarceration on Robben Island to go to the **Pollsmoor Prison**, near Cape Town, South Africa, the Robben Island facility was due to be closed. There was a large colony of cats there, resulting from animals the wardens had introduced as pets, and the official plan was that they should be killed. A volunteer animal lover and the local SPCA were horrified by that idea, and gained permission to evacuate any cats they could find. In the end they managed to locate only 24 – so had all the others already been exterminated? It isn't clear. In the end just 15 cats were healthy enough to follow in Mandela's footsteps and be transferred to Pollsmoor – but there was found to be already a large colony of feral felines there! Some of the inmates had hung sheets from their windows, so the cats could climb up and be fed!

Brock persuaded the authorities to allow her to set up a TNR programme, and to supply food and proper veterinary supplies. To her surprise, wardens and their families chipped in to help with the daily feeding, and to keep an eye on the cats as they, the wardens, did their patrols of the grounds. Cat-loving inmates helped to educate others about the cats and the pleasure they could give. Brock even persuaded the administration to allow the American magazine *Cat Fancy* to visit the prison and interview some of those who had cats. There's an article about Pollsmoor and the cats [here](#), including some of the interviews and dating, I think, from 2009.



A couple of Pollsmoor's feral cats



Nibbles, an inmate's cat

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Similarly to Avenal State Prison (*above*), at the **Roswell Correction Center** in Hagerman, New Mexico, the only answer officials had to controlling the cat population was to kill them – apparently with the blessing of the local Animal Welfare Alliance. After some 15 or 20 had been shot in 2008, for some reason there was a change of heart and it was agreed that a TNR programme would be started – although sickly cats were still likely to be killed. I don't have any later news. An article [here](#) (*March 2008 – archived copy*) refers to Roswell and some other prisons that had cats.

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In the mid-1980s the **Saxerriet Cantonal Prison** for men in Salez, St Gallen canton, Switzerland adopted an experimental Cat Programme whereby individual inmates could adopt cats. It worked well. A report about it was presented at a Glasgow conference in October 2004 and is reproduced below.

The Cat Programme, An Animal-Assisted Therapy at Saxerriet Cantonal Prison for Men: Its Effects and Results in a Correctional Establishment Nadine Nef, M.A. Augwilerstrasse 71, CH-8426, Lufingen, Switzerland. Presentation from the 10th International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions, People and Animals: A Timeless Relationship, Glasgow, Scotland, October 6–9 2004:

‘For the last 70 years Saxerriet, a state penitentiary for men at Salez in eastern Switzerland, has been a semi-open prison for any kind of male inmates (unless they show a high probability of attempting to escape or are particularly dangerous). About 130 inmates work there, mainly in the fields and on the farm with cows, pigs and with the breeding of horses. In the mid-1980s a new experimental programme was created: The Cat Programme, conceived not as it had already been done elsewhere for a group of persons, but for individuals. Usually 20 to 25 inmates, i.e. as many as volunteer for it, are allowed to have their own cat – in their cell or/and outside – under their own responsibility with very strict regulations concerning the wellbeing of the animal. At the end of their internment they may, if possible, take the pet with them. The main purpose of this programme is to give the participants the opportunity to make decisions and take responsibility on their own to learn to care for the welfare of another being. To study the outcomes of this programme, I conducted open-ended structured interviews in 2003 amongst three categories of persons: (1) inmates with cats (also some that had already left prison and led a normal life; (2) inmates without cats; and (3) the personnel involved in and responsible for this programme. Informed consent of all participants was secured in advance. The results were positive in all three categories: For the cat owners, the pet was a means of coping with loneliness, a living creature which they could trust and was non-judgmental; taking care of an animal was also a generally accepted way of showing and giving affection in prison and quite often resulted in an emotional state that facilitated psychological treatment. For some inmates the cat provided the only reason at all to go on living while behind prison bars. As to the inmates without a cat, they all appreciated the presence of the pets in the environment of the prison (in the TV room as well as in the courtyard), but would not keep one themselves, so as not to confine and punish the animal “like a criminal”. Additionally most of these prisoners did not feel able to take on the responsibility of looking after a cat: to feed and keep it clean regularly, to call the staff veterinarian when necessary and choose a cat sitter when they were on leave. For those responsible for the cat programme, they too were very satisfied with the project. Their specific objectives were met. The inmates had learned to take responsibility, which is difficult in a prison, - where everything is strictly regulated. Self-esteem and self-confidence of the prisoners involved had grown, which is a very important step for resocialisation with a view to their lives after prison. Overall the programme had a very positive influence on prison life and is to be continued.’

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When the **South Carolina State Penitentiary** was closed in 1994 there some 50 cats living in the grounds. They were trapped and taken to an animal-welfare organisation.

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In early 2007 the **Southeast State Correctional Facility** in Windsor, Vermont – a women’s prison – began adopting out the cats that had lived there since the 1980s. As with cats in other prisons, caring for them taught the inmates empathy, responsibility and compassion, and a local Humane Society representative said that removing them was ‘unnecessary and insensitive’. The authorities, though, said the physical plant wasn’t conducive to a pet program. I don’t know the eventual outcome; presumably the cats were all rehomed. Article [here](#) (Jan. 2007 – *archived copy*).

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In what was becoming a fairly familiar story, the authorities at the **Utah State Prison** in Draper, UT (now moved elsewhere) in the 1990s and beyond were trapping and killing cats that lived on the prison grounds. That changed when, in 2008, one of the inmates, clutching a tiny kitten, approached counsellor Julie Cox, asking for help and saying, ‘They’re killing the cats. Can you help out?’ Cox felt the policy was quite wrong, with the cats being the innocent victims. Working with the animal-welfare organisation No More Homeless Pets in Utah, she was able to convince the authorities to stop the killing and introduce a TNR programme. Tame cats and kittens were found new homes, while the feral cats and new arrivals were trapped and neutered before being returned to the grounds. Thus it was possible to stabilise the prison-cat population much more effectively. Article [here](#) (Jan. 2008 – *archived copy*).

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In 2009 the **Wyoming Correctional Facility** in Attica, WY faced the same problem as many other prisons: too many feral cats, compounded by irresponsible people dumping their unwanted felines there at night. This prison, in 2005, took the drastic step of rounding up the cats, shutting them in a shed and gassing them with exhaust fumes from a truck. Unsurprisingly no one wanted to talk about the matter, for fear of reprisals. Once again, at the time TNR programmes were starting to be introduced, and the Wyoming County SPCA and other local organisations stepped in and began to deal with the problem. Whether or not there are still cats at the Attica facility I don't know; apparently they used to like to frequent the prison's dairy farm! Article [here](#) (April 2009 – archived copy).

There's a general article about cats in jail, mentioning some of the above, [here](#) (undated).

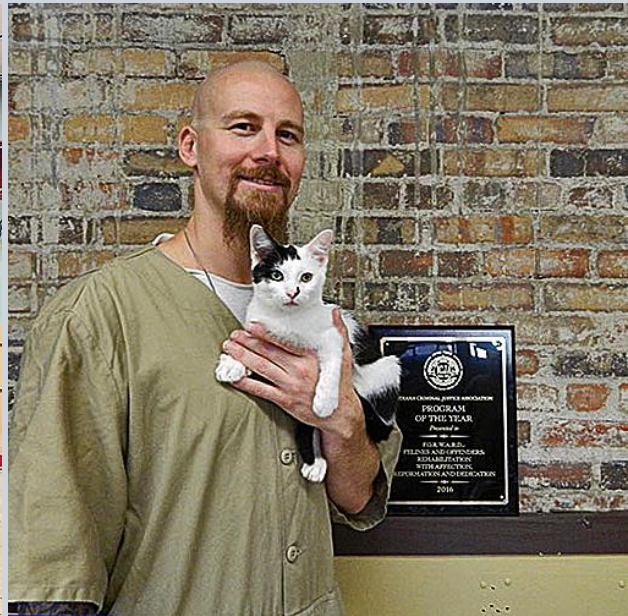
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Later news

In 2015 a new program called FORWARD was started at **Pendleton Correctional Facility** in Indiana (see above) by the Animal Protection League. It proved a great success, with inmates learning how to take responsibility and care for living creatures, how to interact in a group without using violence, and giving them love, often for the first time in their lives.

The cats, many of which came into a shelter after being abused or mistreated, tend not to be socialised and not to trust humans, so aren't suitable for adoption. The programme at the prison, with their carers there all the time, gives them patient and loving care and builds their trust so that eventually they may find a loving home. There's an excellent article explaining the program in more detail from the [Indianapolis Star](#) (Nov. 2020 – archived copy)

See also [Bored Panda](#) (July 2019 – archived copy) and this [YouTube](#) video (2024, 15 minutes) and [this](#) shorter one (also 2024).



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The **Monroe Correctional Complex** in Washington State ran a similar programme to that above, in conjunction with the rescue organisation [Purrfect Pals](#), with similar benefits for inmates and cats. In the second half of 2021 it was rumoured that the prison was to be closed, but it appears still to be functioning in mid-2026.

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At the **Larch Correctional Center** in Yacolt, Washington State, there's an active and successful cat program, run in association with the local Humane Society. A 20-minute video describing it and including interviews with some of the participants is at [YouTube](#).

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The South Carolina Department of Corrections' **Allendale Prison** also runs a successful cat program. There's an interesting [YouTube](#) video showing Animal Planet's Jackson Galaxy visiting the prison and chatting to inmates and staff; also a short video [here](#) (April 2023) showing some of the cats and inmates. Since the introduction of the program the prison has become a much quieter and more peaceful place.



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Based in Bethesda, Maryland, the rescue organisation [Alley Cat Allies](#) in 2015 worked at two prisons in New Jersey: the **Bayside State Prison** in Leesburg and the **Southern State Correctional Facility** in Delmont. A TNR programme already existed at Bayside, but it was expanded and reinvigorated to cover more cats, with nearly 120 animals in all being treated. At Springfield a new program was initiated, dealing with nearly 40 cats there.

Gaining access in order to carry out such programs can be challenging in itself. The rescue staff have to go through clearance procedures involving background checks, ID badges, screening and training in prison regulations. Any veterinary supplies entering the prison grounds must be checked. It also isn't so simple for cats to have vet appointments, so at Bayside a Cat Wellness Programme has been instated to provide systematic and ongoing care for the cats. Each animal has a medical record, a microchip and an annual vet appointment for a general health check, while staff are available for any animal needing extra appointments. All the cats are named, and prison staff and inmates go to great lengths to make sure they're well-cared for. An Alley Cat Allies representative visits regularly.

There's an article about the programme [here](#) (undated). It seems that the facility in Delmont has since closed.



Tiger was one of a few remaining felines at New York's once-notorious Sing Sing prison

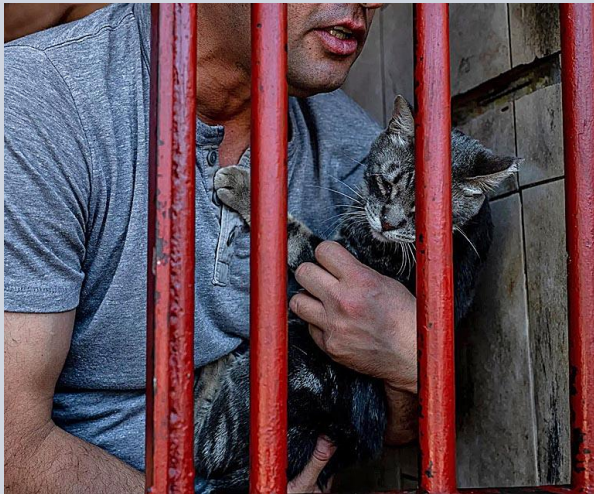
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At the old and overcrowded **Chilean State Penitentiary** in the country's capital city, Santiago, it's generally agreed that the cats were there before the prisoners; but no one's sure whether they were brought in to help deal with the rats, or wandered in on their own. For decades they roamed the prison, largely ignored – and of course multiplied, until there were several hundred of them. With an uncontrolled population conditions were conducive to the spread of disease, and in about 2013 a contagious infection spread through the feline colony, making many animals sick, leaving some of them blind and causing distress even to some of the prison inmates.

Since the late 1970s it was starting to be realised that caring for animals could have a beneficial effect on prisoners and their behaviour, and initiatives had been set up in several countries, notably the United States. They commonly used dogs, but other animals such as horses were also used in some places. Finally the authorities in Chile realised that the cats were good not only for the rat problem; they were good for the human inmates too. In 2016 they finally allowed volunteers in to begin caring for the felines, and a Chilean organisation called the [Felinnos Foundation](#) worked with [Humane World for Animals](#) to collect, treat, spay and neuter them. They have since stabilised the population at around 300 cats, which should gradually reduce as no, or at least many fewer, kittens are born. Inmates have helped the program by collecting cats needing care and taking them to the volunteers.

Prisoners informally adopt the cats, work to care for them, share their food and their beds, and in some cases have built them little houses. In a place notorious for overcrowding and squalid conditions, the cats provide affection and acceptance. 'You dedicate yourself to the cat,' said one. 'You tend to it, keep an eye on it, give it love. The feeling .that comes out of that: there's nothing bad about it.'





[New York Times](#) (Dec. 2023 – archived copy)

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