

## THE PRISON LIBRARY: A VITAL LINK TO EDUCATION, REHABILITATION, AND RECREATION

by  
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### Abstract

This article has been adapted from a paper presented by the author in Cienfuegos, Cuba, November 1999 at the invitation of UNEAC (Union Nacional de Escritores y Aristas Cubano) and the provincial public library in Cienfuegos.

In cooperation with other prison programs the prison library plays a critical part in the education and rehabilitation of incarcerated persons. The background, roles, services, and ways in which the modern prison library can meet the needs of both inmates and prison staff are examined in depth. International and national standards exist as tools that cover all aspects of prison library operations. The most vital link in the operation of such libraries is having competent, well-trained, enthusiastic, and patient library staff equipped with the special human skills needed to deal with difficult prison patrons.

### Background on Prison Libraries and Their Patrons

Incarcerated persons generally have the same reading interests and information needs as individuals in the free world; they can, however, be considered disadvantaged by the mere fact that they do not have physical access to libraries in the outside community. Demographic data show that they are further disadvantaged by a disproportional high level of illiteracy, lack of educational attainment, insufficient vocational skills, and a high rate of mental illness and emotional instability. This is certainly the case in North America and Western Europe, the geographical areas with which this author is most familiar.

Very little research has been published on the nature and extent of prison libraries in other parts of the world, so any generalizations and conclusions made in this paper pertain primarily to the situation in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. In these countries most prisons provide access to reading materials for recreational, educational, and informational purposes; many have well-established libraries that function much like regular public libraries or combined public/school libraries.

In the United States alone there are over one thousand libraries in correctional facilities (prisons) operated by state and federal government authorities, as well as hundreds more library service arrangements in local jails and detention centers.

Much progress has been made over the last three decades in both North America and Europe in developing professionally staffed prison libraries, mainly through the efforts of national library associations, state library agencies, public library systems/authorities, and academic institutions. The governance model for prison libraries may take the form of contracted services between public libraries and/or institutions of higher learning, an operation managed solely by the prison authority, and possibly formal or informal arrangements by volunteer groups. It is not unusual to see a combination of these service methods in a single institution. Regardless of the funding and staffing source, librarians who choose to work in prisons face some very special challenges. Before examining the roles and services of the prison library, it may be informative to take a look at the purpose of imprisonment today, the size and composition of incarcerated population groups, and the needs the library can fill for both inmates and prison staff.

Over time, the Western world has seen changes in the philosophy of what constitutes the nature and purpose of incarceration in society. Today there is still considerable difference among nations on this issue, a fact that is reflected in their widely varying incarceration rates. The pendulum has swung back and forth between emphasis on rehabilitation and punishment/retribution. Today most Western nations attempt to strike a balance between rehabilitation of the offender and public safety. Recently the concept of restorative justice (making the offender "whole") has begun to influence prison programs. Rehabilitation, that is, preparing the offender to function productively as a law-abiding citizen in society, is very costly. Such programs as academic and vocational education, drug and alcohol treatment, and psychological and social services usually suffer when incarceration rates rise. The United States today has the dubious distinction of having doubled its incarceration rate in the 1985-95 decade, although overall crime rates have remained virtually unchanged. According to data by the U.S. Department of Justice Statistics, the U.S. incarceration rate is 600 per 100,000, only surpassed by Russia with 690. In contrast, the incarceration rate in Scandinavia is 62, the Netherlands 65, Germany 85, Spain 105, and Japan 37. With a total prison and jail population today of over 1.5 million, the United States has experienced a major prison construction boom over the last fifteen years. Most of these new facilities include a library with general interest materials and legal collections. Hundreds of new prison librarian and support staff positions have been created, but the supply of qualified candidates has not kept up with demand.

Professional librarians work in both adult and juvenile institutions and their patrons range in age from school children to older adults. In the United States, the fastest growing inmate group is the elderly, primarily due to increasingly longer sentences, less frequent use of parole, and the higher percentage of the incarcerated population being violent offenders. Due to overcrowding, non-violent offenders are more likely to be supervised in less restrictive community settings. The incarceration rate of racial/ethnic minorities is disproportionately high, and the percentage of non- or limited-English speaking inmates is growing, primarily Hispanics and Southeast Asians. In some states, the percentage of inmates with drug and alcohol treatment needs is as high as 60 or 70 percent. A large number of inmates (between 50 and 60 percent) have not completed high school, and many adults and juveniles associate the traditional school system with a long string of academic and personal failures. This fact is, of course, related to the offenders' lack of vocational skills and their inability to find and maintain gainful employment in today's technology dominated job market. The next logical step in this vicious circle is often the commitment of a crime.

One can safely say that incarcerated persons have a large number of unmet needs, which translate into a high demand for information, learning materials, and self-improvement resources; the library, in cooperation with other prison programs, can play a vital role in meeting these needs. Inmates who want to use their time constructively are likely to become avid library users. When time comes to prepare for release, the prison library can provide them with a wealth of job and career related materials as well as community information that may help them survive the first critical months on the outside.

### Prison Library Standards and Guidelines

Today both international and national standards exist as tools for the development and management of prison libraries. In 1995, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published its second edition of *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*, developed by the Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons. This document adheres to the philosophical framework of Rule 40 of the *United Nations Standard Minimal Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, which reads:

"Every institution shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and the prisoners shall be encouraged to make use of it."

The IFLA Guidelines also reference the Charter for the Reader (1994) by the UNESCO International Book Committee and the International Publishers Association, that argues that reading is a universal right. The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1995) further states that public libraries have an obligation to serve prisoners.

The IFLA Guidelines were developed with the assumption that all citizens, including prisoners, are entitled to have access to information, and that libraries providing this access should be located within the prison facility. Further that the prison library should be an essential part of the social and cultural environment of the prison and that prisoners should be given sufficient time to use it. The prison library should be an integral factor in the educational, social, and cultural life of the institution and serve to stimulate the intellectual, social and cultural development of the prisoners. Where the education program is a high priority, library staff should work jointly with the teachers to integrate library resources and materials into the curriculum and to stimulate additional independent study. Further, the library should encourage a climate of intellectual freedom, curiosity, responsibility, creative inquiry and cultural sensitivity, and should assist prisoners in preparing for re-entry into society.

The IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners are meant to serve as a guide in the development of national guidelines in individual countries, where they can be easily modified to conform to local circumstances. Under these general principles, the document addresses all aspects of good library service and operation, including policies & procedures; staff levels and qualifications; collection development; physical facilities & equipment; funding; user services; and library promotion.

In the United States, the American Library Association (ALA) in 1992 published *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* and in 1999 the *Library Standards for Juvenile Correctional Facilities*. Both are tools for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of library services and define acceptable levels of service. Working groups with broad knowledge and experience in the field of professional librarians and correctional administrators have developed these documents. They cover all aspects of library operation, including the integration of new information technology. Quantitative recommendations are based on data collected in a national survey of prison libraries, and both publications include such fundamental documents as the Library Bill of Rights, the Resolution on Prisoners Right to Read, and the Freedom to Read Statement.

In Great Britain, the Library Association in 1997 published their *Guidelines for Prison Libraries*. Besides being very specific about service levels, collections, and staffing, this document includes essential policies by the British Prison Service. It also contains the competencies required for all library staff, as well as the training modules they must complete. It emphasizes the need for a wide variety of materials to meet the needs of persons from many different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

These three guidelines and standards documents provide a solid foundation for library associations or government agencies in other countries that are just beginning to plan or establish prison libraries. Other helpful publications are *Libraries Inside: A Practical Guide for Prison Librarians* (1995), which is being used as a textbook in many library school courses in the USA, and *Down for the Count: A Prison Library Handbook*.

### The Modern Prison Library

What are the most important roles of a modern prison library? They are not very different from those of a public library. In 1992, Rhea Joyce Rubin developed a library planning model specifically for prison libraries that has been used in the states of Massachusetts and Wisconsin in the United States. This model evolved from the widely used *Planning and Role Setting in Public Libraries* (1987) and *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (1987) by McClure et. al. Rubin's *Planning Process for Wisconsin Institution Libraries: A Workbook* (1997) identifies the following possible roles for the prison library:

- (a) Popular reading materials center (i.e. circulation of recreational reading materials)
- (b) Independent learning centers (e.g. assistance in self-directed reading for lifelong learning and personal needs, information on careers and vocational skills, reference services, and assistance with correspondence courses)
- (c) Formal education support center (i.e. information on educational opportunities, and materials and services supporting adult basic education, English for non-native speakers, vocational education, and post secondary education courses)
- (d) Leisure and recreation activities center (e.g. book discussions, film showings, cultural programs, and chess club)
- (e) Legal information center (e.g. legal research tools, case materials, legal forms)
- (f) Treatment program support center (e.g. resources to support substance abuse and anger control programs)
- (g) Information center on outside community (e.g. re-entry information, contact information, social service agency referrals)
- (h) Personal retreat center (i.e. place for patrons to find privacy, quiet, and independent choice)
- (i) Staff research center (i.e. resource provider or clearinghouse for work-related materials and information)
- (j) School curriculum support center (in juvenile facilities, provide materials that supplement textbooks and enhance classroom activities and study).

Because of limited civilian staff, funding, and space, no single prison library can perform all these roles. Often the librarian is the only professional employed and all support staff are inmate workers. The librarian must manage all aspects of the library operation and is forced to concentrate on services that have the most impact and serve the largest number of patrons. Other factors influence the decision of which roles to emphasize. These include the size and security level of the institution, the method of library access (restricted or free movement within the institution), the demographics of the inmate population, the length of sentences the inmates are serving, and the range and nature of other activities and services available, such as treatment and education programs, social services, and inmate employment opportunities.

Whether the selection of primary and secondary roles is the result of a thorough needs assessment or simply dictated by necessity, the fact is that the majority of prison libraries in the United States see their primary functions as popular materials center and legal information center. The support role for independent learning is also very important, as is that of the

community information center. Inmates use libraries very heavily — up to ten times as much as people on the outside. If the library has a current and well balanced collection, indicators like circulation per capita and collection turnover rate (average annual circulation per item) can be very high — ten to fifteen times that of a comparable public library. Obviously, part of the reason is that the inmates constitute a “captive” audience.

The library program does not function independently but operates within the larger prison environment, whose mission and security policies often conflict with the library profession’s code of ethics and its belief in free access to information. The prison environment is an untraditional and inhospitable territory with priorities that challenge “traditional” librarianship and philosophy. How does one provide information freely in a tightly controlled environment with rules and regulations governing almost all aspects of daily life? How does one encourage library patrons to make choices about their reading matter and the pursuit of individual interests, when in almost all other aspects of their lives they have no autonomy? How does one meet the information and diverse reading needs of a large multicultural population? Some answers can be found by looking at what is actually happening today in libraries behind the walls.

During 1997-98, the twenty-seven prison and mental institution libraries in Wisconsin, USA, undertook a strategic planning project based on the previously mentioned *Planning Process for Wisconsin Institution Libraries: A Workbook*. As the first step for developing an appropriate mission statement, and goals and objectives, the libraries conducted a thorough needs assessment which, among other things, identified those activities now performed and associated with the ten possible roles for prison libraries (see above).

The library as a popular materials center attempts to build a well-balanced collection of popular current fiction, non-fiction and magazines. The librarians pay close attention to outside trends in the entertainment world, television and movies, sports events, popular music, and other recreational pursuits. They encourage and respond to patron suggestions. Popular genres are mysteries, westerns, science fiction, crime & suspense, adventure, poetry, romance novels, as well as popular psychology, “how-to” books, and biographies of sports heroes, movie stars and entertainers. Keeping up with the latest bestsellers is quite expensive, since many such titles are of marginal interest after initial heavy use. Balancing current interest items with a substantial number of proven classics seems a reasonable solution. To stretch the often-insufficient budget, most popular titles are obtained in paperback format; they may later, along with back issue magazines, be placed at the inmates’ living units.

The library staff keeps up with the latest publications through book reviews and publishers’ catalogs. They are trained in reader’s guidance (steering patrons to a variety of titles by a favorite author or genre). All the libraries participate in the statewide interlibrary loan network, since the local collections cannot meet all user needs.

The library as an independent learning center provides the patron with materials and tools for self-selected and self-directed learning and self-improvement usually referred to as “lifelong learning”. Prisoners have a lot of time to fill, and they can choose to use this time constructively: learn a new skill, improve existing knowledge and skills, make a contribution to others, or prepare themselves for a successful life after release from prison. The library is often a motivator for such activities, providing the inmates with materials that meet their interests and help them to survive and cope within the prison and on the outside. There are many prisoners who seek help in developing their artistic and musical skills, in learning to read for the first time, or in improving their reading and math skills, mastering a foreign language, writing and publishing stories and poetry, studying for a driver’s license, learning computer skills, taking correspondence courses and participating in various prison volunteer programs.

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections is a certified affiliate of Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA). In many of the prisons, the librarians are LVA tutor trainers who train inmates to tutor other inmates. The librarians also do the student assessment and the evaluation of the tutors who work one-on-one with a student. The libraries also provide space and materials for the program and accept both English- and non-English speaking students (mostly Spanish-speaking). Another library volunteer program is the transcription of textbooks to audiotape. Inmates do the recording and the production of Braille texts. Both of these media are for the use of visually handicapped students in the community and those with reading/learning disabilities. These volunteer programs create much positive publicity for the institution and give the inmates a sense of self-esteem and accomplishment.

For those who want to stay in better touch with their children and be better parents, the prisons offer a program called “Fathers Sharing Books.” The library collects children’s books and the inmates learn techniques for reading aloud to their children and discussing the content with them. The inmates in the program are allowed extra visiting time with their children, and the library supplies the visiting areas with books and educational toys. The fathers are also allowed to make videotapes of themselves reading the books and to send the tapes to their children, if the family cannot visit regularly. This program is very successful and has a long waiting list.

Many prisons that house long-term inmates have both academic and vocational education programs. Here the library plays an important role as a formal education support center by providing class-related materials, extra copies of textbooks, and collecting information for research and teacher assignments. These materials may consist of newspapers, journals, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other subject specific items in either print or CD-ROM format. Many of the prison libraries now have multimedia computers for inmate use. Reference activity is also high in these libraries, and staff often has to obtain additional materials and information through interlibrary loan or by telephone and fax. In the juvenile institutions, the educational role of the library, i.e. the school curriculum support center is of high priority, since school attendance is compulsory, just like on the outside. In the juvenile facilities, the librarians are certified instructional media specialists and usually teach a class in library and research skills.

When the library provides an inviting environment and a helpful staff, it becomes a popular gathering place and a center for leisure and recreational activities. Inmates, who initially come to the library to participate in library-sponsored events, soon discover the many other offerings and become avid readers and library users. The social and cultural activities may consist of film/video showings, lectures, book discussion groups, creative writing workshops, music listening, meetings of cultural and ethnic groups, art exhibits, and contests. Some of the book discussion groups have inmate leaders; sometimes well-known authors are invited to discuss their works and conduct writing workshops. There are also film showings about the culture and customs of other countries, at times accompanied by ethnic music and food. Exhibits are arranged around holidays and celebrations, e.g. Hispanic Heritage Month, Christmas, National Library Week, and the opening of the baseball season.

The role of the legal information center ranks high in all U.S. prisons because of a constitutional mandate that requires prisoners to have access to the courts (i.e. the ability to appeal their sentences, research their cases, and sue over illegal or inhumane treatment). The prison librarians are familiar with legal reference and research and train inmate library clerks to assist other inmates in the use of the legal materials. Maintaining a print based law library is very time consuming and costly and requires a lot of shelving space. With most legal publications now available in electronic format (CD-ROM or databases on the World Wide Web), the libraries are converting to CD-ROM. For security reasons, the prisoners are not allowed to access the Internet. This requires a

CD-ROM server and multiple computer workstations; the initial costs for hardware are high, but the annual upkeep costs have been reduced.

As mentioned earlier, a large number of adult and juvenile inmates need treatment for drug and alcohol addiction and have many other psychological and behavioral problems. Most of the long-term facilities have professional treatment services to help inmates with their addictions and other dysfunctions. These services include individual and group therapy, self-help support groups, and classes to teach anger management, parenting skills, critical thinking and interpersonal communications. At such places, the library functions as a treatment program support center and provides materials for inmates to use on their own or under staff guidance. The Wisconsin prison libraries have recently built extensive collections on substance abuse, physical health & fitness, and mental health (including materials for use in sex offender treatment programs).

In order to keep informed about happenings in their communities and to prepare themselves for release and employment, the inmates use the library as a community information and referral center. In coordination with the social workers and the employment counselors, the library provides career and job information, helps prisoners to write job applications and resumes, and to practice job interviews. The library also provides referrals to, and addresses of employment and social service agencies on the outside. A current project focuses on establishing career/job information centers in seventeen of the prison libraries. The services include the use of interest and ability assessment tools (mostly computer software), videos about a large number of careers and jobs, and the preparation of a personalized pre-release checklist of skills and tasks that the inmate should master or perform before leaving prison. In addition, job agency staff and potential employers have been invited to give talks and conduct mock job interviews.

Prison is a very stressful environment for both staff and inmates. It is noisy and crowded with little privacy. Life is highly regulated, and prisoners have very little autonomy. Sometimes a person just needs to find a place for privacy, relaxation and contemplation. This is when the library becomes a welcome personal retreat center. Nobody tells the inmate what to do or read, and he can exercise his own free choice, even the choice of doing nothing. The psychological service staff likes to send inmates under stress to the library to listen to music or practice meditation.

Some of the prison libraries have also taken on the role of staff research center with separate staff collections on professional development, career advancement, employment tests, and miscellaneous professional materials, including newsletters, journals, training announcements, and research tools for various professions. This role is of secondary importance, since staff, unlike inmates, has the option of retrieving their information from outside the prison.

### Conclusion

It is obvious that a well-established prison library can meet a wide variety of needs and be very influential in the overall prison operation. It is, however, only as good as the professional library staff makes it. Having a competent, well-educated, and enthusiastic staff is the key to a successful prison library. This author has examined the results of a 1995-96 international survey of library schools conducted by IFLA's Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons. The majority of them still do not include services to prisoners in courses on how to serve users with special needs; there are only a few countries where prison librarianship is considered a viable career option.

One should not conclude, however, that all librarians with the appropriate academic training and required professional experience are going to be successful working in a prison community. These individuals must also possess the personal and human skills needed to help difficult patrons with many special needs; they must have the ability to internalize and work with the values of a unique environment that is often filled with ambiguity. It is challenging work that requires flexibility, patience, emotional maturity, sound judgement, high tolerance for stress, and a sense of humor. But being able to make a difference in somebody's life is indeed a gratifying reward!

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