Libraries in Correctional Facilities: An Annotated Bibliography

By

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Articles and Books


Summary: A brief statement from the American Library Association extending the tenets of the Library Bill of Rights to incarcerated communities, the statement argues that the same principles which guide the provision of information services to the general population are no less applicable to prisoners.


Summary: This article examines the information-seeking behaviors of prisoners using a model first introduced by T. D. Wilson in a 1996 article entitled “Information Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Perspective.” The foundations of Wilson’s model were observational, user-centered, and comprised of psychological, sociological, and communication studies. Of particular interest were the development of information ecosystems within prisons. Significantly, the author is interested in how prisoners’ relationship with information affects their post-prison and ability to navigate life after incarceration.


Summary: This book was written by a jail librarian and outreach librarian offering guidance to jail librarians, public librarians creating outreach programs or partnerships, or library and
information science students interested in working with incarcerated communities. The book is a comprehensive discussion of human resources, collection development, prisoners as patrons, facilities, budgets, and collaborative opportunities. The authors emphasize the use of the public library as a model as it’s their belief that three of the American Library Association Core Values—access and intellectual freedom, privacy and confidentiality, and social responsibility—can be directly applied to prison librarianship. Also, the authors extend the public library principle of equal access and equal treatment of all library patrons to the prison population but acknowledge that incarcerated communities present challenges which keep the public library model from being completely applicable.


**Summary:** This a publication of prison library guidelines authored by the Library Association in the United Kingdom (now called the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals—CILIP). The publication discusses the nature of required services, provision of materials, promotion of library services, staffing, accommodation, and finances for prison libraries. The book is an interesting international perspective on the issue of correctional libraries.


**Summary:** This is a Canadian government document providing guidance to Canadian Institutional Libraries on library philosophy, principles of access, staffing, collections, services, facilities, and budgets. It’s a useful international take on the issue of corrections librarianship.

**Summary:** This book is a socio-cultural and historical examination of the role of prison libraries in the United States. In his introduction, the author poses the following question which guides the overall structure of the book: “What are prison libraries for, and how can they best accomplish their purpose?” The book is an examination of the political, social, legal and professional forces which have worked for and against the success of libraries in prisons.


**Summary:** Davis argued that while vocational and personal enrichment library services for prisons are not in short supply, there is a paucity of academic library services. The author argues that reinvigorating these services provides long-term benefits to prisoners, prisons, and their communities and suggests the exploration of partnerships with academic libraries.


**Summary:** The authors of this article sought to examine the reference service needs of prisoners via a New York Public Library Correctional Services (NYPLCS) program in which prisoners submitted reference questions by mail to NYPLCS volunteers. Volunteers consisted of both members of the community and Library and Information Science students. The two aims of the paper were to describe the nature of the prisoners’ reference questions, how those questions reflect prisoners’ information poverty, and to analyze and discuss the methodology.
and procedures of the reference project serving this incarcerated population, while listing project outcomes and avenues for additional research.


**Summary:** Though aimed at an academic audience, this article is a wonderful encapsulation of stories about prisoners who experienced literature as a vehicle to professional and/or personal liberation. Additionally, the author makes an argument for American prison literature as a genre, one which can be used to tell untold stories, but which can also draw readers into the raw, realistic vantage points often overlooked in the academy.


**Summary:** An analysis of the information needs of prisons, this article discusses the historical challenges prison libraries have faced, and some of the actions undertaken to meet the information needs of this population. The surveys included answers about facilities limitations, budgets, and the stresses of dealing with inmates themselves. Also, the author examined a few initiatives undertaken by local prisons and jails in collaboration with public libraries. Lastly, the author conducted two interviews with inmates to learn how the prison library affected their lives.


**Summary:** Drawing from his personal experience as Director of Outreach Services for libraries in Brooklyn and New York, Higgins begins this work by highlighting the high rates of incarceration in the United States. Higgins organizes the work by addressing the “why” of providing services to incarcerated communities and then the “how.” For example, the “why”
discusses the need to acknowledge and address biases of the criminal justice system, combat media perceptions about prisons and prisoners, arguing that outreach services benefit prisoners’ families as well as the prisoners themselves, and acknowledging the limitations of serving this population. The “how” deals specifically with suggestions for creating lending libraries and programs, such as collection development and circulation policies. Also, Higgins describes his experience creating two programs for prisoners and discusses the potential benefits for other libraries seeking to implement similar services.


**Summary:** In this article a Minnesota County Library Outreach Librarian details the limited services offered to youth correctional institutions. The author surveys sixteen county and municipal libraries about the history and nature of services they offered to youth correctional facilities. The author collected survey answers to argue that while these investments are few and far between, the rewards for incarcerated youth and their communities are manifold.


**Summary:** This article begins by noting that the United States incarcerates more human beings than any other nation on the planet. The author suggests that public libraries are well-positioned to provide services to prisons. The author argues, that the extension of library services creates a positive sense of community between the incarcerated and those involved in outreach efforts. Such efforts can assist the post-release transition of prisoners and improve the general public's perception of the incarcerated.

**Summary:** In this law review article the authors argued that a crime policy seeking to reduce recidivism must include education as a key component. The article offers a deep dive into the State of Texas’s prison budgets and prison privatization, and argues that investment in education not only reduces recidivism, but saves the State of Texas money.


**Summary:** A brief, honest, and insightful essay from an inmate of a Wisconsin correctional facility attesting to the intellectual benefits and personal fulfillment of the prison library.


**Summary:** In an interview with Louis Jenkins, a prisoner who is also a published author, Jenkins details the many ways in which his prison library served as a source of structure, as well as a place which inspired him to write.


**Summary:** Pool surveys the status of library services and information resource provision to correctional facilities in relation to public libraries in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The article examines collaborations or proposed services in states like Texas, Illinois, and California. The article focuses on four factors making public library services to correctional institutions of more
pressing concern during this time. The first factor, a heightened interest in serving disadvantaged communities stemming from the political climate of the 1960's; second, the creation of standards promoting relationships between public libraries and correctional institutions; third, the organization of libraries into networks or systems; and fourth, a spate of court decisions during this time supporting the provision of information resources and prisoners' right to read.


**Summary:** Most literature on corrections librarianship centers on services and information provisioning for adults. Sweeney wrote this book to fill that gap and discuss ways in which librarians can design collections and programming for juvenile detention centers. The author discusses the history of juvenile justice and detention in the United States, detainee demographics and profiles, types of information services offered, and the most common models used to provide services to this population. Ultimately, Sweeney's goal is to advance the argument that libraries can play a crucial role in the rehabilitative process and assist juvenile offenders in staying out of the prison pipeline.


**Summary:** Trounstine is a humanities professor who also taught literature at a women's prison, directed inmates in plays, and sought to use literature to help women navigate trauma related to their crimes and incarceration. The author's goal was to communicate that “literature could be a road to insight, and insight could pave the way to change” (p. 676). The article is an optimistic view on the power of education to uplift prisoners with stories, art, and empathy, while recognizing that change and redemption come in many forms.

**Summary:** Vogel wrote this book as a guide for librarians, policymakers, and legislators to promote reading and information as an “emancipator of the human mind” (p. v), and Vogel wrote to provide a practical blueprint for librarians interested in serving this underserved population. While Vogel advocates for the library as a force for intellectual liberation, Vogel is cognizant of the special challenges and limitations posed by prison libraries pursuing grand service visions. Written as a handbook, the chapters provide general overviews and flexible guidelines.


**Summary:** This book might be considered an update to Vogel’s 1995 book *Down for the Count*. Written with the same audience in mind (librarians, policymakers, and legislators), Vogel refreshed the roadmap for information professionals striving to do their work in a fast-paced information age with limited funds. Acknowledging that most prisoners aren’t allowed access to the Internet, Vogel included a chapter about how prison librarians can still use the Internet and online resources to provide services. Vogel remains true to the conviction that prison libraries play an important role for prisoners on the path to retribution, regardless of whether a prisoner ever steps foot outside of the prison again.


**Summary:** Waxler is an English professor at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth and co-founder of the program Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL). CLTL began in 1991 and sought to use stories as a tool to help offenders connect their personal experiences with
characters, language, and discussion. In this article the author detailed some of his first-hand experiences with prisoners and the CLTL program.

**Web Sites, Blogs, Online Articles, and Electronic Resources**


   **Summary:** This is an American Library Association Lib Guide with information regarding policies, programming, and standards related to libraries in prisons. The lib guide shares links to articles and books and outreach programs.


   **Summary:** The Washington State library keeps this blog to share events and initiatives occurring within the institutional libraries of the State of Washington. For example, blog posts can highlight the ways inmates engage with their institutional libraries, showcase poetry and reading programs within correctional institutions, or show how donations benefit correctional facilities.


   **Summary:** It’s taken for granted a correctional institution will have a law library. However, not all inmates are interested in legal research. At the urging of a community activist with Jews United for Justice, the DC Department of Corrections and DC Public Library, collaborated to create a general-purpose library for inmates. Significantly, inmates featured in the story cited
the library as a refuge, and one council member attributed a reduction in inmate suicides to the creation of the library.


Summary: The Read to Me program dates to 1998 and allows incarcerated parents to record themselves reading children’s books, and those recordings are then sent to their children. The hope is that the inmates can maintain a connection with their children through books and literacy. During the program inmates discuss the library as a resource for reintegration and inmates get library cards upon being released. Also, the article ends with ten tips for creating an Intergenerational Reading Program for Incarcerated Parents.


Summary: This article explored ways libraries help reduce recidivism by strengthening family connections through the promotion of literacy with programs like Read to Me, and creating job resource and creative writing workshops. Another example of these efforts is a Denver Public Library program designed especially for female ex-offenders with the intent of reducing stigma and increasing comfort levels. The program, called Women’s Open Lab, offers female ex-offenders library staff assistance with the use of computers for online applications, social media, and accessing online books and music. The article emphasized that programming and outreach initiatives provided a wider public policy benefit for the families of ex-offenders and their communities.

**Summary:** Though the policy discussed in this article was rescinded, the article brings to light some of the political challenges with provisioning information resources for incarcerated communities.


**Summary:** An interview with a Maryland prison librarian and two anonymous prisoners, the prisoners featured in the story described the pleasure of leisure reading and participating in a program which allowed them to read to their children during visitation days. Unfortunately, the program was cut by the State of Maryland. Also, one prisoner recalled how he used the prison library to check out books his daughter (who was 8 when he was incarcerated and was poised to graduate high school as of the interview) was reading in school, to discuss with her and feel closer to her. At the end of the interview a prisoner directly attributes an engagement with literature and the prison with inspiring inmates to better themselves and “move forward.” This is a brief, humanizing look at the power of the prison library.


**Summary:** An honest, first-hand appraisal of the joys, pitfalls, rewards, and challenges of being a prison librarian, the author writes about budget limitations, security, opportunities for creating programming, supervising prisoners who work in the library, and the need for partnerships to
help prison libraries fulfill their missions. Significantly, the author emphasizes that working in a
prison library is not akin to being in a dark dungeon surrounded by heathens. Indeed, the
author is convinced that the ability to change a life with the right book, a poem, or program is
central to the prison library mission of rehabilitation.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/01/16/librarians-despise-
censorship-how-can-prison-librarians-handle-that-its-
complicated/?utm_term=.9d91349ab9b6

Summary: Hart examined the role of censorship in prison libraries, and how that censorship
contradicts the ethical ideals of librarianship. Nevertheless, given the special circumstances of
the populations served by prison libraries, a more rigid regulatory framework is inevitable. The
author argues that while he is opposed to censorship, he could “ethically censor materials by
having a good-faith in the material review process” and accepting the reality that his library was
not like other libraries, and his users not like other users. Nevertheless, the author believes it
acceptable for prison librarians to contest the restriction of “well-known and meritorious works,”
if only to provide an opposing view which might permit the material’s inclusion.

justice. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvPww7m6UzM

Summary: In this video Nick Higgins discusses his view of the general mission of the public
library, his journey to librarianship, and his experience coordinating outreach services for
marginalized and underserved communities at the Brooklyn and New York Public Libraries. A
significant part of the video is about programs and initiatives for incarcerated communities in
Brooklyn and New York. For example, Higgins helped create a Telestory program through
which library patrons could use free video teleconferencing technology to see their incarcerated relatives and read to one another.


Summary: With no funding outside of volunteer staff time and donated materials, two librarians met with the administrators of western North Carolina correctional facilities to discuss ways to provide quality library services for inmates to promote literacy, learning, and personal development. The article describes the efforts of the Fontana Regional Library to contribute time and materials to create a library system for correctional facilities in areas which would otherwise be without any form of library services. This was particularly important as the inmates in these correctional facilities are guaranteed no rights to reading materials.


Summary: According to a 2009 survey cited in this article only four states—Connecticut, Hawaii, Kansas, and Louisiana—offer limited Internet access to inmates. Kansas offered access to minimum security inmates and Louisiana permitted access to inmates within 45 days of their release for job searching. Federal prisons permit some facilities to have limited email access via a system called TRULINCS. Otherwise, inmates are mostly barred from the Internet. The New York Public Library and information studies students with the Pratt Institute work to answer inmate reference questions and serve as an “Internet” of sorts for those for whom quick answers are not an option. Unfortunately, response times aren’t swift. Answering an inmates question can take months. The three main categories of questions were general reference,
questions about re-integrating back into society, and self-help questions. Volunteers avoided questions about contact information for individuals and legal questions, and answers were limited to ten pages. While libraries in Phoenix and Los Angeles stated that inmates have sent reference questions to their staff, the NYPL program is the only program solely dedicated to answering inmate reference questions.


**Summary:** This article profiled examples of prison and public institutional library partnerships. Among those profiled were the New York Public Library’s Correctional Services Program, the state of Colorado’s extensive institutional library program, and the Hennepin County Library (Minnesota). Also mentioned was a San Diego County Library’s program offering newly released inmates help with basic computer skills instruction, job search, job readiness, and interview preparedness. All programs were wonderful examples of public library partners working to improve inmates’ post-release reintegration success and reduce recidivism.


**Summary:** This is an anonymized interview with a prison librarian. In the interview the librarian talks about her educational and professional background, motivation for becoming a prison librarian, safety, and the role of the prison library/librarian. Though short, this is a useful first-hand account of a corrections librarian.

15. Services to the imprisoned. (2012, April 3). Retrieved from https://www.libsuccess.org/Services_for_the_Imprisoned
Summary: This is a best-practices wiki for library services to the imprisoned. Most materials and resources on the wiki are fairly dated, but the information is a good starting point from which to explore the foundations of prison library best practices and literature on librarianship in a correctional institution.


Summary: An updated look at the some of the partnerships between public libraries and correctional institutions, the fundamental tenets of these partnerships remain the promotion of literacy, strengthening family bonds through library services and programming, and preparing inmates set for release for successful reintegration.


Summary: Wonder is the Community Engagement Manager for the Seattle Public Library (SPL), and wrote about SPL’s efforts to study the effects of mass incarceration through a library-facilitated programming series. However, unlike traditional library programming this series was community-led by individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. The advantage to this approach was immediate diversification. For example, Wonder noted that traditional programming consisting of panels, discussion, and Q&A, tended to mostly draw middle class, educated, and white audiences. Deciding upon a community-led engagement approach permitted SPL to broaden its scope from one of simple information sharing to practices with a direct impact on community and social empowerment. Wonder described the importance of
community partnerships, relationship building, and sensitivity. The piece ends with a list of advice for information professionals interested in civic-minded community-led programming.