Prison Libraries: An Annotated Bibliography

Presented To: Professor Keren Dali
Presented By: Sharon Bailey, Kim Parry, Emily Thompson
INF 1300H – LEC 0101
October 24, 2011
Prison Libraries: An Overview

From the earliest recorded evidence of prison libraries—which predate public libraries in many countries—collections were almost exclusively comprised of religious material, primarily the Holy Bible (Curry, Wolf, Boutilier, & Chan, 2003, p. 141). Prison chaplains were de facto librarians, visiting with prisoners and using Bible readings as a tool for “moral guidance and reform” (Sullivan, 1989, Moral Improvement section, para. 1). Though prisons leveraged such religious tools well into the 19th century, shifting ideologies of reform changed the goal from guiding the prisoner down a moral path to “reformation of the deviant”—ushering in an era of “moral terrorism” that continued into the early 20th century (Sullivan, 1989, Moral Improvement section, para. 2). Cloaked in the more liberal vernacular of “inmate education,” however, these techniques paved the way for prison reading programs and more formally organized libraries, many of which are still staffed, at least in part, by inmates (Curry et al., 2003, p. 145).

Not surprisingly, items in library collections continued to be almost exclusively geared towards moral improvement until the 1960s, when civil rights movements saw inmates demanding access to the same material, including legal resources, available to non-incarcerated citizens (Sullivan, 1989, Just Deserts section, para. 2). The resulting shifts in policy changed prison mandates from behaviour modification to personal agency, with an eye to eventual reintegration into society (Curry et al., 2003, p. 142). Libraries became even more organized and professionals were retained to build collections and offer programming and services; such initiatives, including access to non-print material, continue to this day. As far as the pendulum has swung, however, librarians must continue to advocate for the rights of inmates to access information for educational and recreational needs, particularly as public perception often maintains that books, like television and access to the Internet, are luxuries no inmate deserves.
Indeed, inmate use of computers and the Internet is perhaps the most contentious issue facing prison librarians today. With space limitations, budgetary constraints and ever-increasing populations, many prison libraries are attempting to transition from print to electronic materials (Tubbs, 2006, p. 20). However, most corrections officials consider Internet access a dangerous security risk, evidenced by several high-profile scandals wherein prisoners misused computers for criminal gain (Sullivan, 2000, p. 58; Bernstein, 1996). As no federal inmates in the United States or Canada have Internet access, millions of incarcerated people are, as Brenda Vogel argues, “digitally disadvantaged” (2008). This creates a cascade of issues, as releasing “digitally dysfunctional people...into a culture revolutionized by the Digital Age lowers the expectation of a successful life for them, their children, and our community” (Vogel, 2008). Without digital literacy and adequate information-seeking skills, freed prisoners are ill-equipped to participate—let alone compete—in today’s information-driven economy (Vogel, 2008).

In light of these complex issues, tensions may arise between key stakeholders: librarians who want to serve their patrons with adequate collections and helpful programming; prison officials whose focus is security and punishment; and inmates themselves, who may use the library to gain access to justice, better themselves through education, or simply escape, for a time, through reading.

This annotated bibliography aims to provide an introduction for library school students interested in pursuing a career as a prison librarian. Experienced librarians interested in making a move into prison librarianship may also use this tool to apprise themselves of recent scholarship and current issues. Finally, this annotated bibliography aims to give novice prison librarians a theoretical and practical introduction to the issues by highlighting a selection of relevant resources in the areas of programming, access to information, and collection development.
Reference List


**Prison Library Services and Programming**


This book is written by two librarians, one who works in a prison library and one from the public library system. It is a multi-layered book covering practical guidance for collection development, circulation and cataloguing in the prison library. The authors do not shy away from acknowledging the intense environment of a prison institution and they write of more reflective issues of understanding yourself (the librarian), the prison system and the user (prisoner). It is written for librarians in both the public library and corrections library communities. They argue that public librarians should be interested in what is happened with the over 1.5 million people who are currently incarcerated in the United States. Incarcerated patrons who have good experiences with corrections librarians will be encouraged to frequent public libraries after they are released. In light of the fact that people who are marginalized within society who end up in the prison system may view libraries with suspicion (as they are government institutions), making connections with public librarians is extremely important for corrections librarians. The section on programming in corrections libraries is particularly strong as the authors take into account the many logistical considerations in running programming in the prison context.

Garvie’s article is a brief but informative interview with librarian Joanne Lefebvre who runs the prison library in the Collins Bay institution, a medium security prison. Garvie investigates what is behind the locked doors of the library and she finds that cutbacks have greatly decreased the services the library has been able to provide prisoners. Lefebvre is described a ‘one-woman show’ who works to keep the library in operation, although programming and collection development have been severely affected by the financial situation. Based on the experience of many prisoners who leave prison and continue to use the public library system, prison libraries are an essential service.


The very recent Winter 2011 issue of *Library Trends* brings together articles from librarians working in or supervising prison libraries in the United Kingdom, France, Canada, the United States, Spain and Japan among other places. The issue is edited by Vibeke Lehmann, who has worked for the International Federation of Library Associations in developing and improving library services to incarcerated persons. The purpose of this issue was to shed light on an area of librarianship which is not often talked about as well as historical and contemporary contexts of incarceration and how it affects prison libraries, current research findings, standards and guidelines and issues affecting librarians who work in these institutions. Lehmann points out these prison librarians have a great deal of dedication and energy to bring to improving the services prison libraries can offer. Of particular interest to readers in Canada is the article *Correctional Service of Canada Prison Libraries from 1980 to 2010* which details the way library services have changed to adapt to shifts in demographics of the prison population and
technological developments. The authors of this article examine a couple of reports and a national survey conducted by a head prison librarian done in 1981 and found that all of the research demonstrates that the prison library is an indispensable resource for prisoners, particularly with preparation for reintegration back into the community. The programming of book groups, bibliotherapy and reference services are suffering due to growing financial restrictions and cutbacks.


This blog is a tribute to the prison librarian. It is an information hub from one librarian’s experience of working in a prison library and contains links to articles and related blogs on topics of library outreach and services to special populations. It is one of the only blogs on this topic and it aims to challenge stereotypes of prisoners as well as the public’s perceptions of what it is like to work in the prison system. The author, Glennor Shirley, runs all of the libraries for the Maryland prison system and writes of her experiences as well as suggestions for promoting literacy and teaching prisoners to use the legal collections.


What role does the prison library play in the prison system? This article argues that the prison library is integral in the rehabilitation of prisoners and plays a larger role than just supporting
educational courses. The library has long been involved in the promotion of the concept of prisons as a space for rehabilitating the “criminal element of society.” Stevens and Usherwood cast a critical perspective on the role of the prison in the state (specifically England) and how the prison library has been intertwined with this concept since its inception. Historically, criminality was determined to be a lack of moral and spiritual values and when people came into the institution were presented with bibles and scriptures. According to their research, libraries were implemented as early as 1850 in England. Bibliotherapy and reading groups also became more common with the concept of the prison as rehabilitative. The authors conduct qualitative research in adult male prisons to find out what role libraries play in a contemporary context. They find that despite the many restraints on funding, prison libraries and the education programming they support in the prison have a very significant influence on rehabilitative process. They suggest that prison librarians co-ordinate their strategies of service provision with the other services in prison in order to support a holistic view of rehabilitation.

**Access to Information and the Digital Divide**


The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) website contains important legislative and policy documents—including Commissioner’s Directives, issued by the head of the CSC. Two Commissioner’s Directives are directly relevant to the administration of libraries within the federal prison system. CD-720, *Education Programs and Services for Offenders* defines and sets
the scope of institutional libraries, mandating that prisoners should have reasonable access to materials and computer resources, albeit constrained by the security needs of the facility. CD-720 also sets out a list of materials that must be made available (i.e., Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Criminal Code of Canada) and encourages the use of inter-library loans as a means to foster access to information. CD-764, Access to Material and Live Entertainment also speaks to issues of access, setting limits on the types of materials available to inmates. Material concerning the making of weapons, the promotion of hatred, and certain sexually oriented materials are explicitly prohibited. Together, these Directives offer specific and official guidance for the scope and limitations of access to information within Canadian federal prisons.


This paper offers a snapshot of library conditions within Canada’s minimum, medium, and maximum security prisons, with particular emphasis on the size and scope of library collections, collection management policies, and prisoner access to information. Led by Professor Ann Curry of the University of British Columbia’s School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, the authors compiled survey data from questionnaires sent to every federal prison library in Canada. The results describe the state of Canadian prison libraries in 2001 across various dimensions including users and staff, collection content, collection management, policies, funding, performance, access to information and censorship. With respect to access issues in particular, Curry et al. conclude that prisoners are generally information deprived: they have limited access
to quality reference and educational materials, and no access to the Internet. The authors warn that information poverty, exacerbated by low literacy levels, renders prisoners ill-equipped to cope with the complexities of Canada’s information-driven society upon release. As the first (and only known) attempt to benchmark Canada’s prison library collections, this study offers a valuable overview of the nature and state of federal prison libraries in Canada.


Ratified in 2010, this statement is an interpretation of the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights, which speaks to the ethical and philosophical principles underpinning the right of prisoners to read. Opening with a quote from United States Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall emphasizing the fact that inmates are human beings with particular informational needs, the statement asserts that incarcerated persons deserve to have access to information. It further argues that where the law fetters such access, imposed limits should be mindful of the Library Bill of Rights. The statement offers ten principles to guide the provision of library services to prisoners, closing with an assertion that the right to read is an essential right—one that cannot be denied by virtue of incarceration. Although this statement does not have the force of law and derives from an American context, it nevertheless provides an up-to-date and persuasive view of prisoners’ intellectual freedoms and the ethical standards prison librarians should strive to meet in guaranteeing access to information.

This article, published in the official newsletter of the Association for Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (a division of the American Library Association), characterizes American prisons as digital deserts, where more than two million men and women are without access to online resources. Author Brenda Vogel, a retired prison librarian, argues that without digital literacy and proper information-seeking skills, prisoners are being set up to fail once they are released back into society. Absent the skills needed to thrive in an information-based economy, Vogel predicts that prisoners—particularly those who have been incarcerated since before the digital revolution—are unlikely to succeed as law-abiding citizens if they are digitally illiterate. Overall, this article represents a call to arms, urging all information professionals—not just prison librarians—to stand up for prisoners’ rights to intellectual freedom and access to information.


This is a revised and updated edition of Brenda Vogel’s seminal 1995 work, *Down for the count: A prison library handbook*. Having coordinated the Maryland Correctional Education Libraries for more than twenty-five years, Vogel aims to offer a comprehensive, hands-on primer for twenty-first century prison librarians. The book encourages librarians in correctional settings to
do more with their limited resources. To that end, it offers practical advice on maximizing the often-limited space set aside for prison libraries, gives techniques for networking to avoid professional isolation, and outlines strategies for dealing with contraband. Of particular note is the chapter on digital literacy, wherein Vogel vehemently decries the ever-widening information gap experienced by prisoners in the United States, who are not permitted to use the Internet and only rarely permitted to use computers. To assist in bridging this digital divide, Vogel outlines strategies for balancing security needs against the need to equip inmates with skills for basic survival in an increasingly digital world. This book bristles with indignation at the current state of correctional library services in the United States; however, it is also hopeful and inspiring, and represents a key work in the realm of prison librarianship.

Collection Development


*Education Libraries*, a semi-annual publication of the Special Libraries Association Educational Division, published an issue dedicated to prison libraries in 2000. Vibeke Lehmann explores the necessity for prison library collections to offer a link between inmates and materials for rehabilitation, education, and leisure reading. Glen Singer, who is currently the librarian at Columbia Correctional Institution, drills down further, offering an engaging, inside look at building a prison library from the ground up. Collections issues figure prominently, particularly as they relate to the wants and needs of the inmates which Singer says skew to “the immediate
and the popular,” with genre authors such as Stephen King circulating regularly along with “prison classics” such as Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. However, Singer points out that building a collection in a prison context requires much more painstaking research and less face-value reliance on book reviews than that of a public library given the potential implications of certain types of books such as those relating to gang violence, martial arts, or firearms. Coupled with budget constraints, Singer's article paints a sobering picture of a prison librarian's fight to build and maintain a meaningful collection. Fortunately, on the less sobering side, the journal also includes four articles under the heading “The Prison Library as Viewed by Four Inmates” which offer inspiring perspectives on the impact of collection development policies on an inmate’s day-to-day reading habits and his or her experience of the library in general.


Prison inmates have the fundamental right to access law materials while incarcerated. To this end, most prison library collections have both general interest areas and those dedicated to issues of law. As prison librarians are forbidden to offer legal advice, it is extremely important to make available to prisoners the means to conduct legal research. This article addresses issues of collection management as they relate to law libraries in particular, addressing both the skill sets and understanding of prisoners' rights required in order to manage law library collections effectively and ethically. The article explores issues such as start-up budgets (as of 1994 the
average amount required for a core set of materials in an American prison was upwards of US$70,000.00), currency of materials (updating such collections could cost roughly US$10,000 per year), loss and vandalism, and the question of what kind of collection is considered sufficiently adequate to meet the needs of inmates. This last issue is particularly challenging; fortunately, the bibliography points the reader to the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) minimum list of law books they considered necessary. This is an excellent starting point for new or refreshed law library collections. The article also discusses law materials in alternate formats and budget issues related to breadth and currency of information.


Originally published in 1992, with considerable revisions and updates made for this third edition, IFLA's comprehensive set of guidelines for prison librarians offers an excellent introduction to not only recommended policies and procedures but the philosophies behind them, primarily that of a prisoner's right to the same information that would be available to him or her “outside.” Part of the intent of this publication is to equip librarians when making their cases to prison officials and government bodies to either create or maintain prison libraries using international standards and best practices. Guideline 8 contains a wealth of information on building, developing, and maintaining library collections in both print and non-print formats. Suggested policies address donations as well as inter-library loans, which speak to limited budgets and physical space while ensuring continuous circulation of current materials. Section 8.5 is particularly useful; IFLA stresses that policies must take into account the demographic breakdown of the prison population
for both needs and interests and offers a list of types of materials (including fiction, poetry, self-help, legal materials, and newspapers) every prison library should strive to include. The publication also includes a useful glossary and extensive bibliography.


IFLA's Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners includes two recommended textbooks in their bibliography, one of which is this collection of articles written by both current and former prison librarians. While the publication is over 15 years old and focusses on American prisons in particular, the principles and challenges of prison librarianship have continued relevance worldwide, most notably around issues of censorship, a key issue in collections development and management, explored here by Diana Reese, a specialist in correctional librarianship and presently Coordinator of Institutional Library Development at Colorado State Library. Samples of prison library collection management policies are included, as well as request forms for assessing potentially problematic items in collections. Such documents offer an opportunity for a potential or practicing prison librarian to better understand how practitioners in the field have developed and maintained their collections, including how they approach the sensitive issue of culling or refusing materials based on content.

The Library Success wiki offers both a primer on best practices for prison librarians and an opportunity for librarians to share information, resources, and success stories. Contributions include a suggested breakdown of a typical prison library collection with special emphasis on materials that are sufficiently diverse to serve the needs of a diverse population. Censorship is addressed, in brief, but the resources included at the bottom such as “Blogs/Websites to Watch” and “Specific Blog Posts/Articles/Books to Check Out” both of which are regularly updated by the community, provide excellent online resources for librarians in remote, isolated locations to assess and further refine their collections.

**Search Strategies and Task Division**

We searched the Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) database to find articles related to prison libraries. To conduct a broad search, we used search terms “prison or jail” and “librar*” in LISA. The subject term “prison libraries” was an indexed term in LISA and led us to a number of articles, which we narrowed down by looking at only the most recent publications. To locate more specific articles on the topic of access to information, we searched “access” and “(prison or jail or correction* or incarc*)”. This yielded Ann Curry’s invaluable national survey of prison libraries; we found a number of relevant sources from her footnotes and references, including the Commissioner’s Directives. By footnote chasing from Curry’s article, we located additional materials in the Library Literature and Information Science Full Text database. Having become familiar with noted author Vibeke Lehmann through our research, we also did a specific author search for “Lehmann” in Library Literature and Information Science
Full Text. Another database we checked was LegalTrac, where a search of the subject “Prison Libraries” led to a theoretical article on the prison library as essential for rehabilitation of criminals.

To search for professional literature, we searched the American Library Association website with the keyword “prison”. This led to a number of items published by the ALA. We tried the same strategy with the Canadian Library Association; unfortunately, CLA had no resources related to prison libraries.

In the Inforum, books and surveys on prison libraries are on one section of shelves organized by the Dewey Decimal System. A shelf reading of this section was helpful to locate a number of resources for librarians on programming and how to run a prison library. There were numerous sources to sort through; many documents were from the 1980’s and earlier, including annotated bibliographies. We decided to access as many contemporary sources as possible and limited books to those published after 1990.

To ensure we covered the territory, we used Google and Google Scholar to conduct broad online searches. We searched “prison library digital divide” which led to several relevant sources featuring noted author Brenda Vogel. We also searched “communities of prison librarians” which led to a very relevant wiki. The blog Prison Librarian does come up in a Google search of “prison libraries”, however, we had prior knowledge of this blog and it was a great starting place to discover some of the general issues prison librarians face.

Our group consisted of three members and we divided up the work according to subject areas. Kim looked at programming and service provision, Emily took on issues of access to information and the digital divide, and Sharon examined sources relevant to collection development in prison libraries. We found there was a lot of overlap and we collaborated to find
more general sources on prison libraries as a whole. We also divided up the introduction (Emily and Sharon) and the writing of the search strategy section (Kim). We shared the editing duties and conferred with one another about content and organizational structure.

Prison librarianship is a very specialized area and there is not an overwhelming amount of material. Even so, the topic of providing library services to people who are incarcerated is a dynamic one, and incredibly relevant for librarians working in the public system. Indeed, public librarians may encounter people whose first experience of a library was in a jail setting. To fully serve this segment of the population, it is valuable to know the issues prison libraries are facing and how services are delivered. For both society in general and those serving time, libraries are an essential service and this was a fruitful and interesting topic for our group to explore.