

The Role of the Prison Library

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Abstract: Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the role of the prison library. Structure: This essay first points out the background, definition and development of the prison library. Then, through an analysis of relevant literature and instances, the essay emphasises the important role that prison libraries play in offering educational opportunities, protecting prisoners' mental health, strengthening family connections, and supporting personal growth. Prison library is a vital part of the penal system by stopping the cycle of recidivism and promoting personal development. Conclusion: Prison libraries should be expected to take on the role of assisting inmates in their rehabilitation and achieving the library's goal of encouraging people's development.

Keywords: Prison library, The role of the prison library.

1. Introduction

More than 11.5 million people are believed to be incarcerated worldwide, the greatest number ever and a 24 percent increase since 2000. (Global Prison Trends 2022, n.d.) Prison, as a means of punishment for all kinds of crime, is by its very nature for the rehabilitation of offenders, not just for punishment. (Emasealu & Popoola, 2016) In the beginning, convicts were provided with only Bibles and hymns in prison. In 1790, at Walnut Street Jail, the Philadelphia Prison Association started offering books and book services to inmates. (Rubin, 1973) The American Library Association has made a clear case for extending librarianship services to prisons. (admin, 2010)

It is now widely agreed that prison libraries should be based on the public library model and, to the greatest extent feasible, adhere to the professional standards and ethics of the broader library profession. (Finlay & Bates, 2019) Nick Poole notes that there is no substitute for the role of libraries in the prison system. ("Putting Libraries at the Heart of the Prison" - CILIP: The Library and Information Association, n.d.) The Prison Rules 1999 mentioned: "A library shall be provided in every prison and, subject to any directions of the Secretary of State, every prisoner shall be allowed to have library books and to exchange them." (The Prison Rules 1999, n.d.) Today, prison libraries are being built in the United Kingdom, the United States, Greece, Pakistan, India, Australia, Nigeria, and other nations. (Hussain et al., 2023)

This essay critically explores the strengths of prison libraries in supporting the development of prisoners using literature analysis as the major method. Furthermore, the study includes illustrative examples that emphasise the essential responsibilities that prison libraries should do to effectively help prisoners by describing the services they offer. Given their importance, this paper concludes that prison libraries must assume their responsibilities within the prison system so that they can more effectively fulfil their vital role in educating, entertaining, promoting personal growth, and fostering meaningful family connections.

2. Role of Prison Library

2.1. Provide access to educational opportunities.

Prison libraries serve a crucial function in providing educational opportunities for jailed people, allowing them to participate in reading activities and build literacy skills. Offenders enter prison either intentionally or unintentionally. Because of a lack of legal understanding, low reading ability, insufficient education levels, or even utter illiteracy, a considerable fraction of this community ends up incarcerated. (Books beyond Bars, 2022; Prison Education: A Review of Reading Education in Prisons, n.d.)

Literacy and reading are foundational skills that are essential for an individual's overall development. In a study conducted by Clark, a sample of male participants from the New York State Prisoners' Academy was surveyed. The study aimed to compare the outcomes of people who completed an educational programme while incarcerated with those who did not. The study's findings demonstrated a significant connection between finishing an educational programme in jail and a lower likelihood of recidivism, showing that such programmes play a significant part in lowering reoffending rates. (ANALYSIS OF RETURN RATES OF THE INMATE COLLEGE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS | Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). James S. Vacca, who works as a literacy teacher in a correctional facility, points out that prison education programmes are beneficial. Not only does it help reduce the crime rate, but it also helps the country save hundreds of millions of dollars. (Vacca, 2004) Prison libraries are significant repositories of reading materials and literacy resources for jailed people, allowing them access to educational opportunities and potentially saving the state money. The lack of educational resources within prison facilities may lead prisoners to feel isolated and helpless as they face challenges such as being unable to read menus, comprehend letters from their families, secure employment within the prison system, and acquire necessary job-related skills. As a result, inmates fail to attain the goal for which they were rehabilitated. (Prison Education: A Review of Reading Education in Prisons, n.d.)

Several prison libraries are currently actively involved in offering reading materials and encouraging literacy programmes to those who are jailed. Notably, Hydebank Library has launched an admirable reading initiative designed especially for prisoners. Inmates can read out loud in the library, interact with each other and even complete their own creative work. The program's overall effectiveness has been well-received, receiving a lot of good feedback from the participants. The inmates commented that: "Brings order to my chaotic thoughts" "An outlet for frustration and self-negative tendencies"(Libraries Week 2021, 2021)

Inmates at Downview, a women's correctional facility in Surrey, had a high level of participation in the prison library. Specifically, 96% of the inmates had a library membership, while 80% of the inmates participated in book lending activities within a month. As part of the inmate induction process, a noteworthy practice was implemented whereby each individual was escorted to the library and given a bag containing the books they were allowed to carry.(Chief Inspector's Blog: Reading in Prisons – Challenges and Opportunities, n.d.) Through this particular programme, inmates get the chance to access educational materials, which helps them adjust to the jail environment, fosters career opportunities inside the facility, and aids in overall personal development. In prison, 11 percent can't read, so they hold reading groups and give dictionaries as rewards. They employed a range of means to encourage prisoners to develop reading and literacy skills.(HMP Downview Prison Librarian Gives an Inspiring Talk | News | Wimbledon High School, n.d.) This programme strives to give inmates the necessary tools for their successful reintegration into society after release. This intervention dramatically lowers the likelihood of recidivism by addressing the problem of illiteracy and low levels of education, as ex-offenders face fewer barriers to obtaining job and achieving self-sustainability outside of prison walls.

2.2. Promoting the mental health of prisoners

Prison libraries are essential for providing inmates with a comfortable and peaceful environment and helping to protect their mental health. When someone enters the prison system, they frequently run across a variety of difficult situations that might negatively affect their psychological state. Negative psychological problems, including depression and trouble adjusting to the prison environment, might emerge as a result of circumstances including cramped living spaces, little privacy, and increased vulnerability to victimization. (Reingle Gonzalez & Connell, 2014) An unhealthy mental state is not conducive to positive offender rehabilitation, but also tends to make it difficult for offenders to reintegrate into society after their release from prison. In addition, inmates have to bear the cost of mental health treatment after release, increasing the difficulty of earning a living. So, the mental health of prisoners is very important. In fact, people in prison are more likely to develop mental health problems than normal people. (Bate et al., 2023)

Prison libraries provide an escape from these stressors by giving criminals a place to find comfort, partake in leisurely pursuits, and take care of their mental health. According to Larry E. Sullivan, offenders perceive reading in the prison library as a means of salvation for their souls.(Sullivan, 2008) A study conducted by Sanjica Faletar Tanacković et al., encompassing 504 questionnaires from inmates across six prisons, revealed that reading was the most widely embraced

form of leisure among incarcerated individuals. (Tanacković et al., 2021) Franco Vaccarino et al. find that convicts view being able to study in the library as "something that I enjoy"; "normally pretty bloody good" by examining the link between the local library and prison in Whanganui, New Zealand. (Vaccarino & Comrie, 2010) The prison library is a symbol of freedom and hope. In the library, inmates can read about what is happening outside the prison walls, rather than just being confined to the prison.(Little, 1998) Consequently, the prison library not only provides prisoners with a place to unwind but also plays a crucial role in promoting convicts' mental health.

Public libraries in Chile have developed a comprehensive plan for prison libraries, which involves the creation of curated lists of relevant reading items for inmates. Along with expanding the library materials, regular group meetings and writing activities are organised to enable inmates to share their experiences. As a result of their efforts, the number of users and book checkouts continues to increase. And, inmates who attend group sessions have lower anxiety levels and generally lower levels of violence in the prison setting. (Rivera Donoso, 2017)

One of the components of the UK-based charity African Prisons Project (APP) is the development of a prison library. It does more than just expand the collection, but also provides classes, reading activities and more. A woman from Lann'gata Women's Prison shares her writing experience. "We agreed that writing could be a way beyond the prison bars; whatever the prison one is in. And entirely beyond the many bloody and meaty moments that got them into prison, I see the gentleness of these women."(Bowden, 2018) The prison library offers moral support and helps to create a more pleasant learning atmosphere for convicts. As a result, decreased mental stress among inmates results in fewer mental illnesses and acts of violence.

2.3. Building Family Connections

Prison libraries play an important role in facilitating connections between incarcerated individuals and their family members through a variety of literacy activities. The arrest and subsequent incarceration of a parent can have far-reaching negative effects, particularly on children. (Arditti et al., 2003; Orphans of Justice - In Search of the Best Interests of the Child When a Parent Is Imprisoned: A Legal Analysis | QUNO, n.d.)These effects include the separation of parents from their children, resulting in a lack of parental care, limited educational opportunities, and reduced family income. This set of disadvantages has the potential to perpetuate criminal behavior for generations. (Bernstein, 2007; Petsch & Rochlen, n.d.)Therefore, it becomes very important to actively build and maintain family relationships. A very effective way to achieve this goal is through literacy activities organized within the prison library.

Lynch et al. consider family literacy programs to be any activity or program that provides education for adults and children, encourages family reading, helps parents support their children's access to education, etc. (Prins, 2021)Family literacy initiatives significantly influence how children develop. Parental involvement in their children's educational pursuits benefits in encouraging academic performance. (Desforjes, n.d.)When fathers participate in their children's education, Tamis-LeMonda et al. discovered from a survey of 1168 households, children can gain in terms of linguistic and cognitive development. Positive interactions between mothers and kids can help youngsters develop.(Tamis-

LeMonda et al., 2004)

When literacy activities are organized within the prison library, inmates can read aloud and participate in shared learning with their children. This approach has significant benefits in several ways. First, it provides important support for children to gain knowledge and develop a lifelong interest in learning. Second, the involvement of the incarcerated parent provides important emotional support for the child, alleviating the fear associated with prison visits and bridging the gap between parent and child. These outcomes, in turn, promote the child's healthy physical and emotional development. Finally, participation in literacy activities promotes self-transformation among the incarcerated. Arrested parents are motivated to positively rehabilitate themselves and improve their self-esteem, enabling them to better fulfill their parental responsibilities. At the same time, they are much less likely to reoffend. Through these multiple benefits, literacy activities in prison libraries have a positive impact on both the incarcerated and their children, helping to build a more cohesive and resilient family unit. (Bell & Cornwell, 2015; Breaches in the Wall, n.d.; Kazura, 2001)

A charity organisation called "Storybook Dads" strives to keep the bonds between parents who have been arrested and their kids. It is based in the United Kingdom. Through the creation of audio or video recordings of parents reading books, the organisation helps to foster this relationship. The children's familiar voices of their imprisoned parents can be heard on these recordings, fostering a sense of kinship and emotional connection. This project, known as "Stories Beyond the Fence," has been successfully implemented not only in women's prisons, but also in children's prisons, yielding significant positive results. (Stories beyond Bars, 2020)

The Essex Book Festival plans a number of family activities inside the jail to encourage deep bonds between parents serving time and their kids. Collaborative tasks like making handprint calendars that parents can take to prison are among these activities. Parents actively assist their children in choosing books, participate in their educational process, and finally give their children the books they have chosen. The same book is provided to detained parents as part of this programme, enabling them to have fruitful dialogues and deepen their shared interests and topics during the following encounters. This activity has received very positive feedback, for example: "It is very nice that we can take back our picture that our children have done. It keeps them from thinking that we have forgot them." "My son can't wait to leave at a normal visit, he didn't want to go today." (Prison Library: Bringing Children and Dads Together - CILIP: The Library and Information Association, n.d.)

2.4. Develop personal skills to adapt to society

Prison libraries are essential for giving prisoners the fundamental assistance they need to improve their skills. Lacking the essential cultural understanding and survival skills, prisoners have a difficult time finding employment upon release. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of continued poverty and marginalization and perpetuates a recurring cycle of crime and incarceration. (Prison Reform and Alternatives to Imprisonment, n.d.) Prison libraries must therefore consider the development of inmates' personal skills as the key to successful reintegration into society.

Prison libraries should be in charge of instilling a sense of study in inmates and teaching them the essential skills.

Reading in the library can help inmates build a feeling of lifelong learning. (Brosens et al., 2015) Inmates should gain skills once they have a sense of learning. In order to accommodate short-term convicts, HMP Channings Wood provides short courses and qualifications for this population in order to certify the abilities companies require for employment. In addition, they get the chance to obtain instruction in audio/visual editing, which will help them when they are released to find work. (Report on an Unannounced Inspection of HMP Channings Wood by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 11 and 18-22 July 2022, n.d.)

Prison libraries must take on the responsibility of developing digital literacy among inmates. In modern society, digital literacy has become an essential component of human development, recognized as a basic human right by the United Nations in 2016. (jess, 2022) However, many prison libraries in less developed areas currently face challenges in providing access to computers and the Internet. (Eze, 2015) In addition, their collections often do not meet the information needs of inmates. (Bajić, 2015; Canning & Buchanan, 2021) This deficiency hinders the development of information literacy among prisoners and significantly limits their employment opportunities upon release.

Since its launch in October 2014, the female inmate population at Tihar Jail in India has been able to reap the benefits of an e-library. The major goal of this effort is to empower jailed women and improve their technology skills. The e-library provides access to five to six personal computers and two tablets to help with this. Inmates are actively encouraged to engage in online reading and e-learning activities. ('Tihar Jail Launches E-Library for Women Inmates', 2014)

The library at HMP Thameside Prison provides a comprehensive range of services that greatly contribute to the personal development of prisoners. These services include a book club where prisoners have regular access to poetry, fiction and other literary works. The Reading Ahead programme allows inmates to record their progress as they read six books of their choice. The Audiobook Channel provides access to audiobooks, offering another avenue for literary exploration. Puzzle Championship offer inmates the opportunity to participate in chess and sudoku practice. Wayout TV/Way2Learn produces educational content specifically designed for inmates, offering extended learning, training and employment opportunities. The Prison Advice Service (PAS) provides legal advice to prisoners by telephone to ensure their rights are upheld. The National Prison Radio broadcasts selected programmes on holidays. The Therapeutic Arts project provides books and magazines for foreign prisoners, allowing for cultural exchange and creative expression. Finally, the "Stretch" project enables selected prisoners to participate in a project and create comics about their own lives. (What Prison Libraries Have to Offer, 2021) Overall, these services provided by HMP Thameside Prison Library demonstrate a strong commitment to personal development, education, creativity and welfare within the prison community.

3. Conclusion

Prison libraries provide several important benefits as an important catalyst for the development of prisoners. Firstly, they provide access to literacy and reading materials, thus providing educational opportunities within the prison context. This enables prisoners to improve their literacy skills and

expand their knowledge. Secondly, prison libraries create a conducive and relaxing environment that promotes the physical and mental well-being of inmates. They are a sanctuary where prisoners can find comfort, motivation and a sense of purpose, which ultimately helps to reduce the incidence of violence in the prison environment. Third, by providing a platform for incarcerated individuals to engage in reading and related activities with their families, these activities promote communication, emotional bonding, and the development of shared experiences. In this way, prison libraries become an important tool for strengthening family ties, mitigating the negative effects of incarceration on children and breaking the cycle of intergenerational criminal behavior. Finally, prison libraries provide valuable training and resources to develop prisoners' work-related skills, including information literacy, which improves their employability upon release and reduces the likelihood of recidivism.

However, despite the progress made in the development of prison libraries around the world, challenges remain, such as limited funding, understaffing and inadequate collections. (Eze, 2015; Hussain et al., 2023; Mfum, n.d.) These concerns must be solved in order for prison libraries to continue to serve prisoners and society at large effectively.

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