

Library Services to Disadvantaged User Groups: Library services to adult prisoners in the United States

by Glennor Shirley

Prison Library Background

State and Federal prisons house convicted inmates who are incarcerated for longer periods than inmates in jails and detention centers. Offenders in jails and detention centers are either waiting judicial determination or serving short-term sentences. State and Federal prisons provide services, including libraries for individuals in their prisons, while jails and detention center inmates receive services from their local counties. This article will focus primarily on library services in State prisons.

Prisons were first established to banish and confine the offender, subjecting him or her to hard labor. Reading was confined to the Bibles and similar religious material aimed at inculcating morality, the guardian of this genre was the prison chaplain, whose responsibility was to assure the reader's penitence.

The establishment of groups like *The American Library Association*, *The American Correctional Association*, and the *American Prison Association*, nurtured the movement towards developing standards for new and improved library services. This resulted in the publication of *Prison Library Handbook* that was still aimed at „moral therapy”, but by 1992, *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* was drafted by Correctional Institutions librarians and State library consultants.¹

Over time, many factors contributed to the development of prison libraries to provide the improved breadth and quality of services that exist today. Changes were fueled by: the prison reform movement that advocated rehabilitation over punishment, education for a successful reentry to the community, the rights of prisoners, and the 1977 landmark court case, *Bounds vs. Smith* mandating that prisoners have law libraries and access to legal help.² States interpreted *Bounds* in a variety of ways – some established law libraries in the prisons, providing the required core collection of legal materials and the hours of access, others hired legal firms, yet others using the *Library Standards* as guidelines and supported services that were established on the model of public libraries.

Since the 1980s, public and political attitudes have reverted to favoring punishment, and in 1994, The United States Supreme Court in *Lewis vs. Casey* placed restrictions on inmates' rights of access to the courts.³ Consequently, many states have reduced their educational and library services while increasing their expenditures on security.

¹ see American Library Association. Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies Chicago (1992) *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institution*

² *Bounds vs. Smith*. 430 U.S. 817 (1977)

³ *Lewis vs. Casey* 15. F3d 1463 (1994)

Prison Demographics

In 2005, State and Federal prisons, local jails, and detention centers held over 2 million prisoners who are parents to approximately 1.5 million children under age 18. Estimates are that 32 % of African Americans, 17 % Hispanic, and 5.9 % white males will enter the state or federal prison system, at some point. In 2001, 6.6 % of State inmates were women, and 4 % of all prisoners were not U.S. citizens. At some point 95 % of State prisoners will return to the community.⁴

The Library Standards

The *Library Standards* is the benchmark for establishing and maintaining prison library services. It outlines access, minimum standards for staffing, budget, facility size, and collection – elements that are necessary for the provision of acceptable library services in adult state and federal correctional facilities. It includes the *American Library Association's Bill of Rights*, *The Resolution on Prisoners' Right to Read*, *The Freedom to Read*, and *The Freedom to View*. Prison Librarians aim to emulate the Public Library's role of libraries as community information center, formal education support center, independent learning center, popular materials library, and reference library. However, services and facilities vary among and within States, depending on State politics, individual warden's philosophy, budget, and also the nature of the institution. Certain prison facilities are concerned about compliance with Federal guidelines for access to the courts and have little interest in general library services. Others, recognizing the importance of rehabilitation for successful reentry into the community, have supported library collections and services that encourage information seeking and reading for pleasure or for self-help.

Collections

Prisoners have the same information needs as persons in regular society, but with a greater number of them having low education skills, they experience difficulties in articulating their information needs or in their attempts to seek information.

In 2003, this writer used an online prison library listserv to gather information about collection, services, staffing, and programs for prisoners.⁵ An analysis of the responses indicated that while services varied, all librarians aim to create a balanced collection similar to that of a public library. Generally their reference collections comprise almanacs, dictionaries, encyclopedias, directories and legal databases. The general collection includes non-fiction and fiction bestsellers, low level/high interest materials, homegrown newspapers and magazines.

Popular non-fiction reading interest includes self-help, career, biographies, poetry, medical, psychology, religion, art, true crime, sports, body building, writing, paranormal. Popular fiction genre includes horror, mystery, action/adventure, romance, and science fiction. Most libraries stock the classics although this was generally not a high interest item among the populations. They keep this genre because they are primarily donations from the public, and it is part of

⁴ see www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm. [read 06.05.06]

⁵ Shirley, Glennor (2003) Correctional Education, Library Standards, and Diversity. In: Journal of Correctional Education, Special Edition. Diversity Issues in Correctional Education, Vol. 54, Issue 2, pp. 70-74

ensuring a well-rounded collection. There is constant demand, but never an adequate supply of multicultural literature especially materials by and about African American history and heritage.

Collections and services are limited or almost non-existent for non-English speaking prisoners. Lack of budget and inability to communicate due to language differences are reasons for this deficit. One librarian stated she relies on the help of bilingual inmates to help her communicate with other Spanish-speaking patrons. Currently there is an intense political national anti-immigrant movement, and a debate advocating English only as the official language. This will undoubtedly have a negative impact on efforts to improve collections and services for the non English-speaking individuals among the prison population.

Budget/Funding

Library programs are largely funded from *Inmate Welfare Fund*, derived from the markups on inmates' telephone calls and commissary purchases. When there are budget constraints, the library and education programs are the most likely departments to have their services reduced or eliminated. There have been a few cases where library space was taken over and converted to living quarters for new prisoners, and book budgets were cut to the extent that some libraries report that their collection consists mainly of donated items. Where state prisons have library coordinators, they often seek supplemental funding by writing grants, or try to enhance service by establishing more collaborative efforts with relevant library or community partners.

Many prison librarians enhance their programs and services by taking advantage of Federal funds available from IMLS through Library Service and Technology Act (LSTA).⁶ For example, Maryland Correctional Education Libraries (MCEL) has used LSTA funds to purchase: a selection of books in world languages, primarily Spanish, a small selection of books on English as a second language, Spanish/English legal dictionaries for reference, several bilingual dictionaries for circulation, a computer dedicated to multicultural information including a Spanish/English dictionary on CD- Rom, downloaded websites with directories of addresses for Spanish speaking individuals, and published a list of Spanish titles in the library.

MCEL also used LSTA funds to purchase large print books, close caption televisions for deaf inmates, audio books, videotapes, and listening devices. Inmates with visual impairment may get appropriate materials and equipment from the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, as part of Maryland State Library Resource Center.

Staffing

Although *The Standards* recommend minimum staffing based on size of the inmate population, many libraries are understaffed, functioning with a one-person manager. This manager has the sole responsibility for all aspects of the library operations. Areas of operation may include collection management, reader's advisory, reference questions, Internet searches, hiring, training, supervising inmate workers, and working daily with security to ensure inmates get permission to

⁶ see www.imls.gov/about/about.shtm

visit the library. Each library employs inmate workers who assist in all areas of the library processing, circulation, reference etc. Librarians, however, must be constantly vigilant as inmate workers, though very helpful, by the very nature of the prison culture, are likely to engage in manipulative games, some of which may compromise security.⁷ In cases where there is no budget for substitute staff, the libraries close when the librarian takes leave.

Each year, MCEL produces an online *Directory of State Prison Librarians* from a questionnaire sent to each state prison.⁸ The directory lists the name, qualification, address, and employing authority. Prison libraries may be staffed by librarians with a degree in Library Science or an undergraduate degree, or by technicians under the supervision of an off site professional librarian. The libraries and education departments may be under the jurisdiction of the Division of Correction (DOC), or they may exist through the collaborative efforts of the DOC, and other agencies. For example, the Maryland State Department of Education employs MCEL librarians, but that agency receives a subvention from the Maryland's DOC to implement most of the library programs. In this case, funding includes an off site online legal database service that serves to provide inmates with access to the courts. While this writer is aware that private contractors operate a number of prisons, none of the librarians responding to the survey indicated private contractors employed them.

Library Access

Inmates' access to the library varies by institutions, with some libraries operating day and evening hours, seven days a week, to any inmate who is on recreation, while others have limited hours and more controlled access. Librarians must also deliver services to inmates who are segregated from the general population either for protection or because of institutional infractions. Inmates on segregated status receive library services by writing requests using the in house institution mail, or if the institution allows inmate clerks in the cell blocks, they collect and deliver services at scheduled times. Services to segregated units are challenging for librarians because the correctional staff are often lackadaisical or whimsical in their manner or support of the service provider.

Physical access to the library, especially during summer months, is sometimes hindered by institution lockdowns, when there is no inmate movement on the compound. If the duration of the lockdown is more than one week, the librarian answers and delivers information requests through the institution mail.

Censorship

Although *The Standards* assert Prisoners right to read, and non-censorship except for obvious security and pornographic issues, many librarians face intense and often unwarranted scrutiny by prison security staff who tries to impose restrictions on certain library materials. Seasoned Librarians, using the Library Bill of Rights and established guidelines constantly challenge

⁷ Allen, Bud; Bosta, Diana (1981) *Games Criminals Play: How You Can Profit by Knowing Them*. Sacramento: Rae John Publishers

⁸ *Directory of State Prison Librarians*, <http://ce.msde.state.md.us/library/Directory04/directory04.htm>

attempts at censorship, but others admit to abiding by the strictures of the DOC. In a recent discussion list, one librarian shared the challenge of balancing her job as a librarian with security issues. Her collection included the very popular Manga series, but with the recent addition of a sex offender unit, the institution was concerned these may have negative effect on the treatment of the sex offenders.⁹ The present political climate highly favors providing funds for faith-based prison programs and states, vying for these funds, have actually implemented faith based prison programs.¹⁰ To date no librarian has reported any impact on their collection as a result of this faith based initiatives.

Technology

Prisoners have access to computers with application, legal, and educational software but they do not have access to the Internet. This means a prisoner with a long incarceration period, who is returning to the community, will be at a disadvantage in seeking and retrieving information for his or her survival. In 2002, MCEL developed a CD-Rom tutorial that simulated the Internet, to teach inmates how to use the Internet.¹¹ This CD-Rom highlights the job, and housing information that the inmate will need on reentry to the community. It has been requested by several states and is now used in those prisons, juvenile, and youth centers across the United States.

Prison librarians report they have computers with Internet access, but these computers must be kept in an area, inaccessible to inmates. Inmate's requests for information that is available on the Internet must be submitted and delivered at a future time.

Collaborations, partnerships

Prison librarians work as one person managers in isolation from their other library counterparts and without the daily camaraderie and support enjoyed by public and academic librarians. For this article, this writer sent an on line questionnaire to public and prison library listservs, inquiring about service to disadvantaged groups to investigate collaborations.¹² The Office of Literacy and Outreach Services of the American Library Association suggested that the term „underserved” or „unserved” be substituted for „disadvantaged”, because the latter often refers to poor people. Libraries, they say, provide services to people who may not be poor or even at risk, but who are merely limited in their information access due to the absence of technology, disabilities, or even the level of resources, financial or otherwise. Although prisoners fit the category of underserved, they did not feature very much in the responses.

Public librarians considered their disadvantaged user groups as residents living in assisted living facilities': the elderly, the homebound, new immigrants who have limited English skills, children with learning disabilities, persons with disabilities, patients in Community health care centers,

⁹ Prison Library Listserv. Prison-l@ala.org. June 17, 2006

¹⁰ Florida DOC to Establish First Faith-Based Prison. In: Corrections Journal December 22, 2003. p. 3

¹¹ (Initiated and scripted by) Shirley, Glennor (2002) MSDE Discovering the Internet@ your library. Interactive CD-Rom featuring employment, housing, consumer information, library web sites

¹² Questionnaire in May 2006 to Pubprgms@ala.org, Prison-l@ala.org

and participants in Literacy programs. Of the 21 respondents, eight donate their discarded books to the jails and detention centers, one library makes regular stops to Youth Centers as part of an arrangement with the court, and another visits a Youth Center as part of the services under their Youth and Adult Services Division. Youth Centers are the areas where public libraries seem to provide greatest service while jails and detention centers receive marginal services.¹³ Prisons and prison libraries did not feature as a part of their constituents. Prison librarians confirmed that they receive discarded or left overs from book sales, and materials on Interlibrary Loan.

Recognizing the benefits prison libraries could gain from partnerships with public libraries, in 2003, MCEL initiated a program where incarcerated adults read to and with their children and soliciting the help of the Enoch Pratt Public Library (EPFL). The children's librarians visited the prison, taught the men how to identify and read appropriate materials to their children, and how to do story telling. There is now an ongoing partnership between MCEL and EPFL. The library provides the prison with a 6-week deposit of children's book and makes special arrangements for the children of prisoners to participate in the summer reading game. Other partnership efforts between MCEL and EPFL have been joint presentations at library conferences, one being a presentation entitled „Has your Public Librarian been to Prison?“ MCEL has also invited Public librarians to do book discussions with the prison librarians at workshops, one session e.g. was called „Beyond the Bestseller: Alternative Suggestions for Your Patrons.“ Maryland's prison librarian also participates in the training opportunities offered by the State Library Resource Center located at the EPFL.

Prison Library Network

How does the one person prison library manager keep current with prison library trend or trend in libraries generally? If there is a budget, they participate in state library conferences, special library conferences and workshops, or if they forge relationships with public libraries in their communities, they can participate as those libraries allow. MCEL librarians meet quarterly at different venues, and there are guest speakers from different libraries.

At the coordinator administrative level, prison librarians get together at the American Library Association's annual and mid winter conferences where the Prisoners Forum is a part of the *Library Services to Special Populations* section of ASCLA.¹⁴

The *Prison library Listserv* is an extremely important tool for networking. Librarians share stories, pose questions, and offer solutions. It is a helpful tool for librarians new to the prison environment and for library school students who are interested or writing papers on prison librarianship. Another forum for prison librarians is OLOS. On this web site all the libraries that provide services to underserved population are listed.¹⁵

¹³ de la Pena McCook, Kathleen (2004) Public Libraries and People in Jail. In: Reference and User Services Quarterly, Vol. 44, pp. 26-31

¹⁴ see ASCLA, www.ala.org/ala/ascla/ascla.htm

¹⁵ see *Literacy and Outreach Services*, www.ala.org/ala/olos/literacyoutreach.htm

Conclusion

Prison library services vary from state to state and from prison to prison as librarians struggle to balance their role as information providers in environments committed to security. Generally, prison librarians operate as community libraries providing collection and services that meet the information, recreation, educational, self help and reentry needs of prisoners whose information needs and reading interests are similar to those of citizens on the outside.

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[websites read 17.07.06]

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