

# How prison libraries support rehabilitation efforts



Prison libraries open up a world beyond prison bars by allowing inmates to select books and other materials, carry out research, take part in organized activities, enjoy the company of other people or simply relax in a safe and welcoming environment. This can help prisoners to forget for a time the harsh reality of prison life in an otherwise extremely restrictive and regulated environment. Prison libraries have an important role as educational, informational, cultural and recreational meeting and learning spaces for the entire prison community. Providing free access to relevant resources is crucial for prisoners' personal development, well-being and, ultimately, rehabilitation. Taking security issues into account, inmates should be able to enjoy the same-quality library services and materials available to citizens living in freedom.

## The right to prison education and prison library services

Education is a human right to which all people are entitled, regardless of their age, gender or socio-cultural background. Recognition of this fundamental right is at the heart of UNESCO's mission and is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, and other key international instruments.

However, the right of prisoners to access education, including the use of prison library services, is frequently overlooked or disregarded. Prisoners are rarely part of the educational discourse as they are locked away, often at a distance from the public. Prisoners are subject to discrimination generally and to discrimination in the provision of education specifically. Underlying this reality, often, is a belief that the purpose of imprisonment is merely to punish or deter. Such an approach not only runs counter to the commitments countries have

## The Nelson Mandela Rules

The right for prisoners to have access to a prison library is reflected in the authoritative frameworks of the *United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, also called the Nelson Mandela Rules. It contains 122 rules, one of which specifically calls for the establishment of prison libraries.

**Rule 64**  
***Every prison shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it.***

Source: UNODC, 2015

made to protect the basic rights of prisoners, it also negates the potential social benefits and cost savings associated with the rehabilitation of ex-offenders.

Prison populations often include a disproportionate number of persons from poor, discriminated against and marginalized groups and communities. They are much more likely to have had limited or no educational experience, and to suffer from difficulties with reading and writing, than the rest of society. Adding to these challenges is a high rate of substance abuse and mental illness among prisoners in general.

Research suggests linkages between crime, poverty, violence and educational disadvantage; the failure to educate prisoners therefore comes with tremendous economic and social costs as there is a danger of perpetuating existing socio-economic inequalities. By contrast, investment in prison education is one way of supporting rehabilitation efforts and may well be repaid many times over in reduced rates of recidivism and fewer criminal offences in society.

The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education produced a report to the United Nations General Assembly on the rights to education of people in detention, which listed institutional and situational barriers to learning identified by inmates themselves. These included inadequate prison libraries, or their complete absence, and the scarcity and confiscation of written and educational materials in general. Prisoners also mentioned limited or no access to and training in information and communication technology and related skills necessary in everyday life. The Special Rapporteur therefore recommended that 'detention institutions should maintain well-funded and accessible libraries, stocked with an adequate and appropriate range of resources and technology available for all categories of detainees' (Muñoz, 2009, p. 25).

## The benefits of prison libraries

Offering quality prison library services has various benefits, although prison libraries will differ according to the needs of their audiences. A prison library for adult men will look different from a service for incarcerated youth or a prison library for women, including mothers and their small children. Also, the library service in a regular prison might look different from a library service in a high-security prison.

Through prison library services, prisoners have the chance to experience the joy of access to reading and other materials, such as music or film, for education, entertainment, spiritual development, distraction, or simply recreation. The time in prison should encourage them to continue or return to learning and to develop a long-term interest in and habit of reading. Prison libraries are important community spaces for lifelong learning, offering a means of finding constructive ways of spending what all inmates have: time.

Providing access to **education** is one of the most obvious benefits of a prison library, which can support prison education programmes and distance education, enable inmates to obtain educational qualifications, offer career orientation, provide resources for prison educators, and support skills development and vocational training. Some inmates have the opportunity to assist in running prison libraries, which in return provides them with valuable work experience. Prison libraries should also provide access to information and communication technology to enable and prepare prisoners to live in an increasingly digital society.

Prison communities often include people from **different ethnic and language backgrounds** and with **different literacy levels**. By collecting, sharing and displaying information and materials for different cultures, the prison library fosters understanding of individual backgrounds and encourages tolerance. Literature in various languages, dictionaries and language courses support the learning process of prisoners. In many prison libraries, special attention needs to be given to prisoners with low literacy levels and from foreign language backgrounds; this can be done by providing easy-reading materials in various languages. At the same time, there might also be highly educated and qualified prisoners, including political prisoners and imprisoned journalists, who also need to be catered for.

Prison libraries support **social cohesion** by providing a relaxed, safe environment and meeting place. They can be the cultural centre of the prison, offering activities such as concerts, readings, debates, films and other forms of artistic expression. By working closely with other prison departments and with organizations outside the prison environment, they can also provide a bridge to events and services beyond the prison walls.

Offering **literacy activities and reading promotion strategies**, such as reading circles, book clubs, creative writing workshops or publishing a prison newspaper, contribute to fostering a reading culture and can be a transformative experience. Such literacy-related activities have the potential to support critical thinking, enabling prisoners to broaden their perspectives; reduce stress and depression; and increase empathy, communication skills and self-esteem.

Using prison library services is one of the very few opportunities inmates have for taking responsibility for making their own choices. This promotes inmates' **autonomy** and gives them a level of intellectual freedom that essentially catalyses self-directed and critical decision-making skills. The prison library supports prisoners in reflecting on their past and current situations and in planning for their future. By providing access to legal information, prison

## IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is the global voice of library and information services. IFLA fosters the work and activities of prison libraries within its Section for Library Services to People with Special Needs (LSN). Through this section, an international network of prison librarians has been created, which represents a good opportunity for cooperation, knowledge-sharing and mutual support in this special field. The section reviews and updates the IFLA *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*, which provides practical guidance through 94 recommendations on how to implement adequate services that can be adapted to suit local contexts.

### Major points of the IFLA Guidelines

- Written policies should be developed by national and/or local prison authorities.
- Library services should be accessible to all prisoners.
- No censorship shall be applied in the selection of materials, except where an individual title/item is known to cause a threat to prison security.
- At least two books per prisoner should be available in each housing unit and every prisoner should be able to select at least two new titles per week.
- The prison library should make use of current information technology to the extent possible without compromising prison security.
- All prison libraries, regardless of size, should be supervised/managed by a professional librarian.

Source: Lehmann and Locke, 2005

libraries assist prisoners in better understanding their cases and, if they do not have legal representation, defending themselves in court.

Prison libraries can play a role in minimizing the negative impact of incarceration on **families**, particularly on children. They can provide family literacy activities during family visits or support incarcerated parents in reading with and for their children. They can offer inmates assistance in building new and different lives once released by offering advice and practical information for re-settling.

### From commitment to delivery

Unfortunately, many prison libraries still work in isolation and face significant challenges. There are still prisons that do not offer prison library services at all. When available, they are most likely not managed by qualified staff and are often insufficiently funded. Furthermore, they often have to rely on donated and often outdated materials that do not reflect the interests, reading levels, language skills or needs of a diverse prison population. Free access to education and information might be further hindered by strict

regulations or sometimes arbitrary censorship measures, or even by charging prisoners for downloading media.

Prison libraries need to be further developed based on updated policy documents and guidelines, relevant data and impact research capturing effective practices. One practical way of ensuring professional standards is to work closely with the local (public) library service. Knowledge, training and materials can be shared and common activities can be implemented, serving as a bridge between both worlds. Initiatives should come from both sides of the prison walls, this is particularly important if there are no or very limited prison library services. Materials can be shared via an interlibrary-loan system, ensuring a regular rotation of materials and facilitating relevant donations to the prison library.

Prison authorities and relevant stakeholders need to be aware of the importance and potential impact of the prison library service. Implementing and funding a well-functioning prison library service is a cost-effective way of sharing valuable resources by creating a constructive and transformative learning space with far-reaching and lasting effects.

## Policy recommendations

### **The role of prison libraries needs to be recognized in relevant policy regulations.**

The provision of a prison library should be codified into national or state law. Their operation and funding should be based on up-to-date policy documents, with international, regional and national policies and guidelines adapted at a local level. Regular exchanges and cooperation between representatives of prison libraries, prison authorities and relevant stakeholders should be institutionalized to further review and develop these documents.

### **Prison libraries should network and model the general library system.**

Prison libraries should not operate in isolation, but work closely with the local (public) library system. Apart from ensuring professional and modern library management, this enables inmates to experience a public service that they will hopefully continue using once they are released. Being an integral part of the library system would strengthen the position of prison libraries. The establishment of local, regional and national prison library networks and associations should be encouraged.

### **Prison libraries need to be managed by qualified prison library staff with access to sufficient budget and resources.**

Initial and ongoing training for all prison library staff – professional librarians and prison staff acting as prison librarians – must be ensured to enable the provision of professional services. Inmate assistants and community volunteers should also benefit from in-service support. Sufficient budget is needed to cover salaries, materials, inventory, information technology and events.

### **Prison libraries should be attractive meeting and learning spaces.**

Prison libraries should provide an attractive, safe, friendly and welcoming environment. Proper library

design and functional and flexible library furniture and decoration can enrich the library users' experience. To enhance the transformative potential of reading and writing and to give an incentive to use their services, prison libraries should organize literacy activities and cultural performances. This can be done in cooperation with other prison departments, the local (public) library or other community services and outside facilitators.

### **Prison libraries should contribute to a literate environment that encourages inmates to develop, enhance and sustain literacy skills.**

The library collection should be adequate and appropriate, reflecting the needs of a diverse prison population. This includes access to electronic media and the internet within the framework of security regulations. Prison libraries also need to be inclusive by providing materials for inmates with different literacy levels and abilities, and in languages that are represented in the prison environment. Ideally, inmates should be allowed to enter the library space to select their own materials.

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This policy brief is mainly based on the findings of the UIL publication *Books beyond bars: The transformative potential of prison libraries* (Krolak, 2019). It has been further refined through consultation with the global IFLA Working Group on Prison Libraries.



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