READING, REHABILITATION, & REINTEGRATION: A REVIEW OF PRISON LIBRARY SERVICES IN MANITOBA

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As a library consultant for the Manitoba Public Library Services Branch, I conducted interviews with representatives from each of the correctional facilities located in Manitoba, including two youth centres, seven provincial institutions and one federal institution. These interviews were intended to aid in the evaluation of library services currently offered to incarcerated individuals. The aim of this article is to outline some of the challenges, emphasize the positive work taking place, and highlight opportunities.

In Canada there are many pressures affecting the correctional system, which in turn affect the provision of library services. These include crowding, disproportionate representation of disadvantaged minority groups, and high proportions of substance abuse and mental health issues (The Correctional Investigator, 2013). Learning disabilities are also common among Canadian inmates (CSC, 2010).

Library services can have a profound effect on the correctional environment. In addition to recreational reading, program support, and literacy improvement, libraries in correctional institutions provide a space where inmates are free to make their own choices (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). Prison libraries have unique challenges, which include having many goals to accomplish within a defined budget, diverse demographics to serve, minimal support, and the requirement to adhere to prison rules (Curry et al., 2003).
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The Canadian Library Association and the Canadian Association of Law Libraries recently released a joint “Position Statement on the Fundamental Right of People who are Incarcerated to Read, Learn and Access Information,” which highlights the prevalent issues in correctional facilities in Canada and advocates for resources to be put towards the provision of library services (2014). While change may be distant, librarians across the country are working to improve outreach services to inmates.

Many of the library services currently in place within correctional facilities in Manitoba consist of collections of donated books that are maintained by assigned staff without library training. These correctional libraries represent an opportunity for libraries on the outside to contribute to lasting social change by being involved with inmates, for whom library access can have a very profound impact.

A NOTE ON GUIDELINES

Standards for prison library services are laid out in various documents, and these can provide benchmarks to which prison libraries may aspire. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has published Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners, which covers all elements of prison library service (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). Correctional Service Canada’s National Guide for Institutional Libraries was inspired by IFLA’s Guidelines and informed by Canadian correctional regulations (CSC, 2012). However, adherence to this guide is unregulated, even in federal institutions.

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Despite limited resources and competing priorities for space allocations, some prison library programs continue to exist. At the Manitoba Youth Centre (MYC), when the library was repurposed to a teacher resource staff room, teachers created a book club in the common area between two of the units. The book collection is comprised of quality donations as well as some newly-purchased books, and students have shown interest because of the currency of the collection. The teachers found that when they implemented a paper-based sign-out system, they had very few problems with book destruction.

The positive effects of the recent MYC program have not been measured, but there is anecdotal evidence that the program is having an impact by improving behaviour. Since the book club happens on Thursday night, some staff remark that the units are quieter on the weekend. Also, seeing students discussing books is a welcome and positive change.

FUNDING AND STAFF

The IFLA Guidelines stipulate that library budgets should include salaries, materials, subscriptions, equipment, supplies, IT, network and consortial memberships, training and database fees (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). Based on the interviews I conducted, in order to acquire materials, most Manitoba prison libraries rely on donations, and very few use a directed fund to purchase materials. Many libraries are considered part of the education department and some use funds remaining from the education budget for acquisitions. Some prison libraries use the Inmate Surplus or Inmate Welfare Fund, which is the profit from inmate canteen purchases.

The IFLA Guidelines recommend that each correctional institution employ a professional librarian (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). However, even at the one federal institution in Manitoba, the person responsible for the library is a teacher, and only staffs the library half-time. It appears that most of the institutions in Manitoba
have education personnel running the library or correctional officers overseeing it. It does not seem that library personnel currently participate in library-related professional development or have built networks with other library staff within the sector.

The issues highlighted in this article underscore the need for public library involvement in supporting library service in correctional institutions. Librarians can facilitate book donations, supply inter-library loans, and provide advice on stewardship of collections beyond cataloguing, including ways to engage inmate and staff patrons in library programming. Creating these relationships also has the potential to introduce inmates to the public library, allowing them to use the library as a resource once they are released.

VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

As is the trend across the country, many prison libraries in Manitoba are operating despite budget constraints and limited staff expertise. Some volunteer programs are filling the gaps and augmenting library services for inmates. The Manitoba Library Association’s Prison Libraries Committee (PLC) is currently facilitating collection development and programming for the Winnipeg Remand Centre and the Women’s Correctional Centre (WCC). They solicit donations, process books, and deliver them to the facilities. They also run “Open Library” programs in both facilities in which volunteers provide readers’ advisory to inmates.

Many of the PLC volunteers are professional librarians, and their expertise has driven insightful library development. Their interest in community-led library services has led them to use surveys and focus groups to determine the materials and programming most appropriate for the inmates at the Women’s Correctional Centre. They have also been involved in Resource Fairs, in which community organizations give inmates information that can be used upon their release.

The Prison Libraries Committee has also coordinated authors and musicians to work with inmates. Notably, in October 2014, Beatrice Mosionier came to talk to inmates at the Women’s Correctional Centre. Her book, April Raintree, is one of the most requested books at the facility.

Another important volunteer program is Book Clubs for Inmates, which is taking place at Stony Mountain Institute. Through this program, inmates are given one book per month, and a monthly book club is held.

CENSORSHIP

The IFLA Guidelines state that prison libraries should have a collection management policy in place, and that items should not be censored unless they pose an actual security threat (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). On the Canadian correctional front, Commissioner’s Directive 764 provides more detail on inappropriate subject matter: detailed
information on committing crimes or making weapons; advocacy of hatred or genocide; sexual material that involves violence, criminal activity or children; excessive violence or prison violence; and anything that undermines the dignity of a person (CSC, 1999).

Collection development policies ensure that items are not unnecessarily weeded from prison collections, ensuring access to the widest variety of titles possible. As a best practice I strongly encourage existing prison libraries in Manitoba and any future prison-library-partnerships to employ written collection development policies. Currently, most of the libraries employ non-standardized screening methods, and some of them do not screen books at all. The emphasis on security is very important in prison facilities, so there is a need for collection development policies that take into account institutional rules. Policies will help ensure the safety of the facility, as well as equitable access to materials for inmates.

LIBRARY SPACES

In a correctional facility, the library has the potential to be a welcoming space where the harsher aspects of prison life do not apply, and some Manitoba prison libraries are succeeding at creating these spaces. The Stony Mountain Institute library, for example, resembles the environment clients might expect from visiting a small public library. The bays of books are organized according to genre, with Aboriginal interest, fantasy, and science fiction featured prominently. There is also a varied non-fiction collection and a French language collection. Twice per week, up to 25 inmates benefit from using the library. The space is welcoming as there are nooks and crannies for inmates to sit and look at books and the natural light is also a welcome addition.

CONCLUSION

Prison libraries are often overlooked as an integral part of the correctional process. Regardless of the benefits of library service, the fact remains that inmates are citizens who retain the right to have access to information (CLA/CALL, 2014). There are many opportunities for librarians to make a difference by offering their time and expertise. Almost all inmates will return to their home communities eventually, and in order for them to reintegrate successfully it is necessary that they have the chance to re-evaluate their actions and thought patterns in a constructive way (The Correctional Investigator, 2014). Library service in correctional institutions has the potential to offer such opportunities and can be initiated or enhanced through partnerships between the administrators of correctional institutions and public libraries.


