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## Public Libraries and People in Jail

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Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963.

That detention can turn into a horror like that at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison is hard to fathom, but incarceration of any sort always seems to exist on the edge of sanity, ready to transmute into grim, even fatal, encounters.<sup>[sup1]</sup> The inhumane treatment of prisoners in Iraq or Afghanistan is emblematic of the worst sort of pendulum swing tracked in Harun Farocki's study of prison control in California or mass beatings at Chicago's Cook County Jail.<sup>[sup2]</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writing from a cell in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 when jailed by Bull Connor for demonstrating without a permit, wrote, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Dr. King's words give succor to those who want to make a difference. While we may not be able to change the prison-industrial complex that has grown so much over the last decades we can, as working librarians, take first steps. We can seek to ensure that people held in local jails have library service. There are some public libraries and projects that provide guidance in this path. If we help one even one person, we help all.

The United States incarcerates more people than any other nation in the developed world. There are more than two million people in prison or jail and more than 50 percent of the people incarcerated are of Latino or African American heritage.<sup>[sup3]</sup> Educational support programs that might prevent imprisonment in the first place have been cut. For the United States, prisons are the primary weapons against crime and drug abuse--a real failure of national responsibility to the poor and ill educated. The prevailing ideology of the twenty-first-century United States prison-industrial complex seems to be retribution rather than rehabilitation. In an increasingly privatized corrections system, there are fewer resources available to assist the incarcerated in reentry to the larger society.<sup>[sup4]</sup>

In this "Community Building" column the intent is to provide a brief look at library philosophies of service relating to incarcerated people and examples of public libraries providing service to people in local detention centers.

#### PHILOSOPHY OF LIBRARY SERVICE TO PRISONERS

Inmates may be in jails or prisons. Prisons are federal or state institutions for offenders who have been convicted of crimes. Prison library service is generally outside the purview of local public libraries because state and federal prisons have their own libraries. Brenda Vogel's 1995 prison library handbook, *Down for the Count*, provides the philosophy of service to prisoners, procedures, resources, and a

thoughtful commentary for librarians working in state or federal institutions.<sup>[sup5]</sup> Sadly, prison library service has an ever-larger constituency. In 2000 there were 1,668 adult correctional facilities--a 14 percent increase from 1995. These included 94 federal, 1,320 state, and 264 private.<sup>[sup6]</sup>

A jail is a local (city or county) facility that receives individuals pending arraignment and holds them awaiting trial, conviction, or sentencing. A jail also holds inmates sentenced to short terms (generally under one year). The median sentence for all inmates sentenced to jail is 8.7 months. There are 3,365 jails in the United States and these held 691,301 people at midyear 2003, an increase of 25,826 from the 665,475 held at midyear 2002 (3.9 percent). From 1990 to 2003 the number of jail inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents grew from 163 to 238. The jail population is 43.6 percent white, 39.2 percent African American, 15.4 percent Latino, and 1.8 percent other ethnicities (Asian American, American Indian).<sup>[sup7]</sup> The total number of people who spend time in jail over a given year can be much higher. Many county jails provide an updated count on a daily basis. For instance, the Hillsborough County (Tampa, Fla.) Jail notes that the count on July 18, 2004, was 4,728 but the total count of inmates since January 1, 2004, was 44,662.<sup>[sup8]</sup>

The public library focus on serving people in jail was very high in the 1970s and 1980s. The work of Rhea Joyce Rubin, director of the Cook County Corrections Library Project (1973-75), helped to frame the rationale for public libraries to serve people in jails.<sup>[sup9]</sup> A Library Services and Construction Act grant to the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) in 1979-80 for the project Improving Jail Library Service resulted in a guide for jail library service and a workshop that trained one hundred librarians.<sup>[sup10]</sup> This was the last profession-wide initiative to formulate values and develop skills and techniques to deliver library services to local detention centers. During this time the American Library Association developed the policy on library service to detention centers and jails.

#### SERVICE TO DETENTION FACILITIES AND JAILS

The American Library Association encourages public libraries and systems to extend their services to residents of jails and other detention facilities within their taxing areas. ALA instructs its Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies in cooperation with the Public Library Association, the American Library Trustee Association, and other interested units to design a plan to assist public libraries in extending their services to local jails and detention facilities. (ALA Policy Manual).

A survey of the nation's jails in 1976-77 found that fewer than 20 percent of the nations' jails were provided with library services from the local public library.<sup>[sup11]</sup> Wallace, writing in The Adult Services in the Eighties study, found that service to the incarcerated was more likely to be provided by larger libraries that had made use of the PLA planning process.<sup>[sup12]</sup> No more recent national data exists as to the extent that public libraries serve local jails and detention centers.

Standards do exist. The Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies developed library standards for service to correctional institutions in 1981 and 1992. A few states, like Iowa, include library service to jails in state public library standards. The American Correctional Association includes library service in its Performance-Based Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities.<sup>[sup13]</sup>

One aspect of library service to incarcerated people that continues to receive attention is meaningful access to the courts as first laid out in *Bounds v. Smith* but altered in *Lewis v. Casey*. Westwood has provided a useful summary and bibliography on access to legal information, and Gerken has explored what *Lewis* means to prison libraries. The American Association of Law Librarians has set forth the responsibilities of county law libraries to people in jails in *County Public Law Library Standards*.<sup>[sup14]</sup>

## PUBLIC LIBRARIES SERVING JAILS

While there is a solid statement of policy on public library service to people in jail, there is little information about the number of libraries that choose to do so. There have been a very few recent articles that provide insights into single library programs. Geary's 2003 article on prison library trends includes mention of jail service; McLean interviewed librarians serving the jail in the King County (Wash.) Library System (2002); and Sullivan has explored society's disregard of the "Least of Our Brethren" (2000).<sup>[sup15]</sup> However, these are cases rather than a comprehensive assessment of the current status of library service to people in jail.

A search of public library Web sites in spring 2004 yielded several examples of public library outreach to jails. These public libraries provide a variety of approaches.

\* California. Alameda County Library. Library service and literacy/life skills instruction to the more than four thousand men and women held in county jails are provided. Members of the community donate more than 75 percent of the materials circulated each year. Reading for Life is a comprehensive prerelease program for low literacy-level students incarcerated in the county jails. Helping adults improve their literacy skills is a fundamental theme in the library's commitment to "access to books, information, and services that promote learning and enjoyment for everyone." (Alameda County Library Mission Statement) [www.aclibrary.org/services/jails.asp](http://www.aclibrary.org/services/jails.asp)

\* Colorado. Arapahoe Library District. Choose Freedom Read is an innovative program for jail inmates that involves public librarians giving book talks that describe some twenty titles to groups of ten to twenty inmate patrons; it exposes these patrons to a broad variety of genres and titles, and supplements the jail's book-cart service and law library sessions. The collaborative program benefits not only the inmate patrons but also the jail's librarians and public library readers' advisers. [www.arapahoelibraries.org/FamilyofSites/OutreachServices.cfm](http://www.arapahoelibraries.org/FamilyofSites/OutreachServices.cfm)

\* Indiana. Monroe County Public Library. The Jail Library Project is a cooperative agreement with the Correctional Center that provides the space for the library within the center, as well as funds for books and other library materials. The Monroe County Public Library provides staff members to open the library three afternoons a week and order the materials. [www.monroe.lib.in.us/outreach/jaillibrary.html](http://www.monroe.lib.in.us/outreach/jaillibrary.html)

\* Maryland. Montgomery County Public Libraries. The Correctional Facility Library has two missions: to provide basic public library services within the setting of a correctional institution and to provide access and assistance with legal resources, as mandated by Maryland law. Popular-interest reading collections of books, newspapers, and magazines are available in English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese. The "Reading Club" provides basic literacy tutoring for inmates. Program oversight is

provided by a community volunteer, with informal one-on-one tutoring provided by other inmates.  
[www.montgomerycountymd.gov/libtmpl.asp?url=/content/libraries/Branc hInfo/de.asp](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/libtmpl.asp?url=/content/libraries/Branc hInfo/de.asp)

\* Minnesota. Hennepin County Library. Service to corrections includes the Adult Detention Center operated by the county Sheriff's Department, a six-hundred-bed pre-sentencing facility that booked more than 49,000 individuals in 2000. Library service consists of a collection of donated and withdrawn paper-backs distributed to the eight sections of the jail on booktrucks. The Adult Corrections Facility (ACF) is made up of three housing units: the men's section, the women's section, and the work/study release section. Outreach staff visit all three sections each Tuesday to deliver and take information material requests. In addition to supplying books and other materials to the residents of the correctional facilities, Outreach also continues in the Hennepin County Library tradition of promoting literacy and the benefits of reading via authors programs, writing workshops, and storytellers. The library also collaborates with ACF on the Read-to-Me program, which teaches residents about both the short- and long-term benefits of reading to their children. [www.hclib.org/pub/NewOutreach/corrections.cfm](http://www.hclib.org/pub/NewOutreach/corrections.cfm)

\* Virginia. Chesterfield County Public Library. Outreach Services provides library service to individuals incarcerated at the county jail. Inmates are served on a weekly basis. Periodicals are delivered for use by incarcerated adult males at the county work-release site.  
[www.co.chesterfield.va.us/Humanservices/Libraries](http://www.co.chesterfield.va.us/Humanservices/Libraries)

Without a comprehensive assessment of the scope of library service to people in jails, we must rely upon Web site coverage or brief mentions in articles. There are likely other fine examples of public libraries providing jail library service, but without open discussion it is not an easy matter to identify models. Please send the editor notice about your program at the address at the column's opening.

#### JAIL LIBRARY SERVICE BUILDS COMMUNITY

In what ways does library service for people in jail build community? Klofas has explored the various roles played by the jail in local communities.<sup>[sup16]</sup> Many of these roles are aspects of social services such as providing temporary shelter for the indigent homeless or those suffering from substance abuse or mental illness. The integration of libraries for social service information provision or literacy programs can overlap with the needs of people before or after they are in jail. Societal attitudes are stringent toward people who have spent time incarcerated. Summarizing the history of library outreach to prisoners, Sullivan and Vogel note:

Toward the close of the twentieth century, prison libraries, which had become libraries not unlike those of the outside world, were at the mercy of a conservative Supreme Court and a political climate that supported long and hard incarceration.<sup>[sup17]</sup>

We can infer that it will take commitment and involvement on the part of the library community to overcome the harshness of the larger society toward people in jail and prison. There are several library-connected initiatives that demonstrate a kinder philosophical approach to those in jails that offer new ways of approaching service.

The work of the Jail Library Group (JLG) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies is an enduring collaboration with Dane County, Wisconsin, jails that provides educational, recreational, and community resource reading materials to the residents of the jail facilities in Dane County, Wisconsin. A goal of the JLG is to educate the volunteers and the local community about issues related to incarceration, poverty, crime, justice, and fairness that are a part of and affect the community.[sup18]

Jail library service is often closely tied to literacy. Correctional Education Facts documents the lack of educational opportunity available in jails and the literacy needs of inmates.[sup19] Clark and Patrick provide a summary of an innovative approach in Colorado to stimulate interest in reading among jail inmates.[sup20] Recognizing that assisting their families can help people in jail and prison is a project of the Family and Corrections Network (FCN)--a natural alliance for librarians seeking to develop linkages.[sup21]

A call for papers from the American Jail Association seeks articles on "The Jail in the Community" for a fall 2004 issue of American Jails, noting that too often government officials only pay lip service to the jail as a community agency.[sup22] But if the jail is a community agency, would it not be more purposeful for other community agencies to work so that the jail is a service of last recourse? Indeed jails as community agencies and the entire growing prison system have been seen as inimical to democracy by Davis, who notes, "To safeguard a democratic future, it is possible and necessary to weave together the many and increasing strands of resistance to the prison industrial complex into a powerful movement for social transformation." [sup23]

These issues are the focus of the ASCLA "Library Service to Prisoners Forum," which seeks to raise the consciousness level of people within the library and correctional communities regarding the urgent and particular library and information needs of all prisoners; to encourage and assist librarians to begin, expand, and improve library service to prisoners and correctional staff; to serve as a clearing-house for information, ideas, materials, programs, and human resources for correctional library services; to contribute to and promote cooperation among the library communities and correctional agencies and organizations; to initiate and support pertinent legislation; and to contribute to and promote the adoption and improvement of standards for correctional library service.[sup24] Broader participation in the Prisoner Forum will enable more librarians to discern the need for services to incarcerated people.

With more than 600,000 prisoners released each year, the problems of reentry for prisoners and their families will continue to be a growing challenge to those public libraries that choose to help. Ex-offenders need assistance in literacy, job-seeking, eligibility for government assistance, medical care, and housing.[sup25] As pointed out in The New Landscape of Imprisonment, there is a mismatch between where prisoners' families live and where prisoners serve.[sup26] Thus libraries in communities that house prisons might find the need to serve people whose socioeconomic characteristics differ from the extant community. The opportunity to do so likely has to be sought. Through participation with advocacy organizations such as "The Sentencing Project" public librarians can be apprised of efforts to understand criminal justice policy and inequities in the system.[sup27]

By developing programs that reach out to those in jail and those just out of jail, librarians can open the door to reflection and new rules that promote fairness and a chance for prisoners to participate in the life of democracy--what Earl Shorris has called riches for the poor.[sup28]

#### ADDED MATERIAL

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