

Rethinking the dichotomy between libraries and prisons: Reflections from research in Northern Ireland

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Abstract: This piece considers the challenges of providing library services in a prison setting and offers insights from current prison library research being carried out in Northern Ireland.

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Keywords: *prison libraries, desistance theory, library services, Northern Ireland, professional ethics*



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I am going to begin this column with a disclaimer: *I am not a prison librarian*. I have a background in academic librarianship as well as some experience researching prison library services in the United Kingdom and United States. I write fully aware that there are those in the library profession who hold both greater knowledge of and first-hand experience with these issues, but I also hope that some of my reflections may help foster an international dialogue and provoke discussions about the current challenges facing prison library services.

Providing library services to the incarcerated is a challenging task for a wide range of reasons. Prison libraries can be short-staffed and under-resourced, censorship is often a necessity, and inmates rarely have enough access to the information they need or want. Many of these challenges stem from the simple fact that the ethical values of librarianship are almost antithetical to the agenda of the prison system. Incarceration inherently limits the freedom, privacy, and autonomy of individuals - three ingredients that are key to the provision of effective library services. Prison librarians have the added challenge of providing services in an institution whose policies are constantly changing. An increasingly punitive criminal justice system can have especially damaging consequences on the prison library, which is often considered a peripheral service within the institution.

The Northern Irish Context

Access to library services is a legal requirement for each prison in Northern Ireland. While there are some existing publications on prison library services in the United Kingdom (e.g. Bowe, 2011 and Stevens, 1998), no research has been carried out on prison libraries in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has undergone a large-scale review in recent years, resulting in numerous policy changes.

These new policies have been informed by the work of desistance scholars within the field of criminology, who offer evidence-based research on how to best support offenders in their journey of moving away from criminal behaviour. Their approach toward desistance is less punitive and more holistic than traditional views of incarceration and rehabilitation, and it is encouraging that their research has been taken onboard by those managing the prison service. The diagram below outlines a range of factors to support the desistance of prisoners:



Figure 1. Factors Supporting Desistance (NIPS, 2015)

The official strategy published by the NIPS to support desistance makes no reference to the prison library. This is unsurprising as penal policies frequently overlook or completely dismiss its role. If the outcomes of library services were taken more seriously, policymakers might begin to acknowledge the role of the library in supporting many of the factors presented in Figure 1. For example, family literacy programmes facilitated by the library help to maintain family contact and improve the literacy development of both parent and child. Participation in informal learning programmes and reading groups can give prisoners a positive “place in a social group.” Recreational reading in itself can contribute to the wellbeing, hope and motivation of inmates. It is right for prison librarians to be cautious about adapting to the frequent shifts in penal policy which are so often opposed to the objectives of library services. Perhaps this desistance model presents an opportunity, without straying from the ethical principles of librarianship, to show how the prison library strongly contributes to many of the objectives of the institution.

Robert Stearns, a U.S. corrections librarian, once emphasised the need for empirical prison library research with strong philosophical foundations which could contribute to the fields of librarianship as well as criminology (Stearns, 2004). A look back over recent literature shows that library researchers have generally failed to meet this challenge. While there are many insightful publications on prison libraries and librarianship, they are often based on opinion rather than empirical evidence. Stearns also recognises that this is not something that a prison librarian can do alone, for they have neither the time nor the resources to carry out these kind of studies. I would argue that there is a responsibility for other researchers within the library profession to work alongside prison librarians in order to carry out comprehensive research grounded in both library science and criminological theory. Criminologists in Europe are beginning to recognise the importance of informal

learning within prisons, but even prison education research rarely alludes to the role of the library. If the impact of library services caught the attention of academics beyond the library field, it could raise the profile of the often crucial work carried out by prison librarians.

I recognise that I am writing this in a country whose criminal justice system is, at least in theory, making positive steps toward supporting the desistance of offenders. My research examines incarcerated women's experiences of library services to better understand the value of library services and how they impact women's lives during incarceration. It may not be so easy to conduct such research in countries with more punitive criminal justice systems. Despite this, the call to support prison libraries still remains. There appears to be a growing global discussion on professional ethics within the library and information profession, and yet the very sector in which our ethical values are most challenged continues to receive the least attention. Perhaps current discussions around intellectual freedom, privacy, and the freedom to access information is an opportunity for renewed dialogue amongst both library researchers and practitioners on how best to advocate for prison libraries and prison librarians.

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