

The Role of Prison Libraries

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Abstract

This research paper aims to study the role of prison libraries. It begins by outlining the background, definition, and development of prison libraries. Through analysis of relevant literature and examples, it emphasizes how prison libraries play a vital role in offering educational opportunities, supporting inmates' mental health, strengthening family relationships, and encouraging personal development. Prison libraries are a crucial part of the correctional system as they break the cycle of reoffending and promote self-growth. They are expected to support prisoners in their rehabilitation and fulfill the library's mission of fostering public development.

Keywords: employment skills, family ties, mental health, creative programs, educational needs

Introduction

Globally, over 11.5 million people are currently incarcerated, the highest number recorded to date, with a 24% increase since 2015 (Global Prison Trends 2022, n.d.). While prisons serve as a means of punishment for various crimes, they also function as rehabilitation centres for offenders (Emaselu & Popoola, 2016). Initially, only religious books were provided to inmates to guide them spiritually. Gradually, prisoners were allowed to continue their education in prison and were given access to a wider range of books.

Library organizations have clearly stated their role in expanding library services within prisons (Admin, 2010). It is now widely accepted that prison libraries should be modelled after public libraries and should follow professional standards and ethics of library services as much as possible (Finlay & Bates, 2019).

The role of libraries in the prison system is indispensable. The 1999 Prison Rules stated that each prison shall have a library as directed by the Secretary of State, and inmates shall be allowed to keep and exchange library books (Prison Rules 1999, n.d.). In India today, prison libraries are being developed based on the public library model (Hussain et al., 2023). This research paper critically explores the potential of prison libraries in supporting prisoner development through literature analysis.

Moreover, the study includes examples emphasizing the responsibilities that prison libraries must fulfill to effectively help inmates and describes the services provided. Given their importance, the paper concludes that prison libraries should embrace their roles in the prison system to effectively promote education, recreation, personal growth, and stronger family connections.

The Role of Prison Libraries:

1. Providing Educational Opportunities

Prison libraries play a crucial role in offering inmates educational opportunities, encouraging them to engage in reading activities, and helping develop literacy skills. Many offenders enter prison either knowingly or unknowingly due to a lack of legal awareness, poor literacy, low educational attainment, or even illiteracy (Books Beyond Bars, 2022; Prison Education: A Review of Reading Education in Prisons, n.d.). Literacy and reading are fundamental and essential skills for personal development.

In a study conducted by Clark, a survey was conducted among male inmates in the New York State Prison Academy. The study aimed to compare outcomes of inmates who completed educational programs with those who did not. The findings showed a significant correlation between completing educational programs and a reduced likelihood of reoffending, indicating such programs play a key role in reducing recidivism.

Satyaprakash Gujar, a teacher in a correctional facility, states that educational programs in prisons are beneficial. They help reduce crime rates and save the country millions of rupees

(Vacca, 2004). Prison libraries serve as vital repositories of reading materials and literacy resources for inmates, enabling access to education and potentially saving state funds. A lack of educational resources in prison facilities can make inmates feel isolated and helpless, especially if they cannot read menus, understand letters from family, or acquire prison-based jobs and skills. As a result, rehabilitation goals often remain unachieved.

2. Promoting Mental Health

Prison libraries are essential for providing inmates with a calm and comforting environment, aiding in the protection of their mental health. Inmates often face challenging situations upon entering prison, which can negatively affect their mental state. Overcrowding, lack of privacy, and feelings of insecurity can lead to depression and difficulty adapting to the prison environment.

Poor mental health is not conducive to rehabilitation. After release, reintegrating into society becomes difficult, and the cost of mental health treatment can burden former inmates. Therefore, inmates' mental well-being is extremely important. In fact, people in prisons are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than the general population (Bate et al., 2023). Prison libraries offer a space where inmates can find comfort, engage in creative work, and care for their mental health, helping them cope with prison stress. For inmates, reading in the prison library often becomes a form of soul-healing. In a study involving 102 questionnaires from inmates across three prisons, Rajesh Tyagi found that reading was the most commonly chosen form of relaxation among prisoners.

The prison library symbolizes freedom and hope. Inside, inmates can read about life beyond the prison walls. Thus, prison libraries not only offer relaxation but also play a critical role in promoting inmates' mental health. Public libraries in Maharashtra have developed a comprehensive plan for prison libraries, including curated reading lists for inmates. They also organize regular group sessions and writing activities, allowing inmates to share their experiences. These efforts have increased user engagement and book checkouts. Furthermore, inmates attending group sessions reported lower anxiety levels, and the rate of violence in prisons generally decreased. Prison libraries provide moral support and help create a more positive educational environment, reducing psychological distress, mental illness, and violence.

3. Strengthening Family Relationships

Through various literacy initiatives, prison libraries play a key role in facilitating connections between inmates and their family members. Parental incarceration can have lasting negative effects on children, including separation from parents, reduced care, limited educational opportunities, and decreased family income. These issues can contribute to generational cycles of criminal behavior. Thus, actively maintaining family connections becomes crucial.

One effective way to achieve this is through literacy programs in prison libraries. These initiatives allow inmates to read aloud and engage in shared learning with their children. This approach offers several important benefits. First, it helps foster a lifelong love of learning in children. Second, parental involvement provides emotional support, reduces fear related to prison visits, and strengthens the bond between parent and child. This contributes to the child's healthy physical and emotional development. Lastly, participating in literacy programs encourages self-transformation in inmates, motivating them toward positive rehabilitation and improved self-esteem. This helps them fulfil their parenting roles more effectively and significantly reduces the chances of reoffending. Through these benefits, literacy programs in prison libraries have a positive impact on both inmates and their children, fostering more cohesive and resilient families.

4. Helping Develop Personal Skills for Social Reintegration

Prison libraries are essential for providing inmates with the basic support needed to enhance their skills. Without adequate cultural understanding and life skills, released inmates struggle

to find employment. This can lead to on going poverty and neglect, perpetuating the cycle of crime and incarceration. Therefore, prison libraries should view the development of inmates' personal skills as the key to successful reintegration into society.

Reading in libraries fosters a lifelong learning mind set among inmates. Once inmates develop a learning habit, they should be equipped with job-ready skills. For short-term inmates, enrolment in short courses helps them acquire relevant employment skills. Additionally, they have opportunities to receive training in audio/visual editing, which can assist in job searches after release. Prison libraries should also take responsibility for developing digital literacy among inmates.

In the modern world, digital literacy is an essential component of human development and was recognized as a basic human right by the United Nations in 2016. However, many prison libraries still face challenges in providing computer and internet access. Moreover, their collections often fail to meet inmates' information needs. This deficiency hinders the development of information literacy and significantly limits inmates' employment opportunities after release.

Conclusion

Prison libraries serve as powerful catalysts for inmate development, offering numerous essential benefits. First, they provide access to literacy and reading materials, facilitating educational opportunities within the prison context. This empowers inmates to improve literacy and expand knowledge. Second, prison libraries create supportive and comfortable environments that promote physical and mental well-being. They serve as sanctuaries where inmates find comfort, inspiration, and a sense of purpose, ultimately helping reduce prison violence. Third, by enabling inmates to engage in shared reading and related activities with their families, prison libraries foster communication, emotional bonding, and shared experiences. This strengthens family ties, mitigates the negative effects of incarceration on children, and helps break intergenerational cycles of criminal behaviour. Finally, prison libraries provide valuable training and resources to develop work-related skills, including information literacy, which enhances employability post-release and reduces the likelihood of reoffending.

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