ALA POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Investing in Prison Libraries

A Cost-Effective Path to Safer Communities and Second Chances

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ABSTRACT

Prison libraries play a crucial role in preparing incarcerated individuals for reintegration into society. These libraries offer programs that enhance literacy, develop job skills, and maintain family connections, thereby supporting successful reentry. However, inconsistent and inadequate funding limits their impact. By investing in prison libraries, we can provide second chances and reduce the considerable economic and social costs of recidivism, contributing to safer communities.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States today roughly 1.25 million people are held in state and federal prisons,[1] and another 664,200 in local jails.[2] While more than 600,000 people are released from prison each year,[3] many people have difficulty making the transition back to society, and about two thirds of state prisoners are rearrested within three years.[4] Left unaddressed, this cycle of incarceration and recidivism imposes enormous costs. Our nation spends an estimated $182 billion annually on corrections, including tens of thousands of dollars per prisoner.[5] But there is a way to reduce these costs while enhancing public safety and human dignity: investing in prison libraries and education. Studies show that access to books and educational programs in prison can dramatically reduce recidivism and help returning citizens lead successful lives and become productive members of society. Strikingly, every dollar spent on prison education yields $5 in savings on future incarceration costs over three years, a nearly 400% return.[6] Prison libraries contribute significantly to the education of the incarcerated and provide additional resources and services that prepare individuals for reentry, helping to reduce recidivism.

This white paper argues that prison libraries serve the goals of public safety and fiscal responsibility, as well as the values of rehabilitation and human dignity. While the focus of this paper is on prison libraries, we also draw examples from the analogous institutions of jails and juvenile detention centers. We present evidence that robust prison libraries support literacy and learning—creating opportunities and contributing to safer communities. We summarize the current state of U.S. prison libraries; and highlight key challenges they face including a chronic lack of funding, complex censorship

policies, and limited digital tools. We call for policy and philanthropic support to expand and fund prison libraries as an effective, high-impact approach to improving public safety and reducing taxpayer costs. Everyone benefits when people who have been incarcerated are best equipped to return, find gainful employment, and rebuild familial connections.

THE U.S. INCARCERATION LANDSCAPE
COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Incarceration in the United States

The United States has "the highest incarceration rate of any independent democracy on earth."[7] And, over the last several decades (1972–2022), imprisonment rates in U.S. prisons have risen dramatically,[8] with nearly 2 million people incarcerated across the nation today.[9] Of these, more than half—about one and a quarter million people—are detained in state and federal prisons, while others are held in local jails, juvenile correctional facilities, immigration detention centers, Indian country jails, state psychiatric hospitals, military prisons, and other locations.[10] Incarceration has a profound impact not only on the lives of the individuals behind prison walls, but also their families, communities, and the American cultural and economic landscape. Strikingly, a study from the Institute for Justice Research and Development at Florida State University on the economic burden of incarceration estimates, "For every dollar in corrections costs, incarceration generates an additional ten dollars in social costs."[11]

Imprisonment often serves to widen already existing educational and social gaps: more than two thirds (68%) of incarcerated people in state prisons lack a high school diploma[12] and the average literacy and numeracy skills of incarcerated populations are significantly below the general public.[13] Further, a disproportionate percentage of today's prisoners grew up in poverty,[14] and just 35% of incarcerated individuals were employed in the year prior to entering prison.[15] Additionally, people of color,[16] and members of the LGBTQIA+ community[17] are significantly overrepresented in the country's prisons and jails. Following release, these pre-existing economic and educational disparities, as well as other barriers, fuel recidivism. National studies find that roughly two-thirds of prisoners are rearrested within three years (about 70%, though

Bipartisan Efforts to Mitigate the Impacts of Incarceration

Incarceration impacts communities across the United States and efforts to address it cut across party lines. At both the state and federal level, bipartisan policies have worked to mitigate the impacts of incarceration on families and communities.

Efforts have focused on overhauling federal prison oversight and supporting successful reentry. For example:

First Step Act: In 2018 under President Trump, Congress passed the First Step Act with bipartisan support. The Act sought "to expand opportunities for people in federal prison to participate in rehabilitative programming to support their success after release."[18]

Fair Chance Act: In 2019 a bipartisan group from both houses of Congress led to the successful passage of the Fair Chance Act, which prohibits "federal agencies and federal contractors from requesting criminal history information from [job] applicants until they reach the conditional offer stage."[19] States and cities across the country have already passed similar "ban the box" laws.[20]

Senate Prison Policy Working Group: Senator Jon Ossoff (D-GA) and former Senator Mike Braun (R-IN) launched a bipartisan Senate Prison Policy Working Group in 2022.[21] Through the development of bipartisan policies and proposals the group aims to "improve the safety and well-being of incarcerated people and staff, reduce recidivism rates and promote transparency within the prison system."[22]

Federal Prison Oversight Act: In 2024, founding members of the Senate Prison Policy Working Group introduced the Federal Prison Oversight Act, which was signed into law in July of 2024. The Act was supported by a wide variety of stakeholders including civil rights groups and the Council of Prison Locals, representing correctional officers.[23]

These efforts, among others, illustrate the shared desire to address the impact of incarceration on our nation.

exact rates vary by study).[24] High recidivism means repeated criminal justice costs and community harm. On average the annual cost of incarceration fee (COIF) for a person incarcerated at the federal level in a Bureau or non-Bureau facility in 2023 was $44,090 ($120.80 per day).[25] Meanwhile, a Vera Institute of Justice survey found an average state prison cost of ~$33,000 per incarcerated person per year[26]—so each avoided re-incarceration saves significant public funds and social costs.

The Challenge of Reentry

One of the greatest challenges facing the carceral system is how to facilitate a successful reentry to society once people leave prison. Upon reentry people face a myriad of challenges. This includes financial instability; difficulty accessing reliable transportation, housing, and government-issued IDs; lack of workforce skills and work experience; health challenges; as well as limited awareness of the resources and help that may exist.[27] Formerly incarcerated people encounter a more hostile job market than prior to incarceration, facing the stigma of having a criminal record and challenges in obtaining employment due to employer-required background checks. Returning individuals, especially those who have been incarcerated for a significant amount of time, may have limited family or other support networks to return to and may lack the digital skills necessary to navigate everyday life in today's digital world.[28] All these factors play into the typically high rates of recidivism for formerly incarcerated people.

Several authorities emphasize that reducing recidivism is one of the clearest ways to improve safety and reduce the costs of the carceral system. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, "the first and most important step in reentry planning is obtaining information about an individual inmate's risk of recidivating and programmatic needs that will inform development of an individualized reentry plan."[29] By identifying the specific challenges each person faces from day one, such as criminal history, education level, and substance abuse, an effective plan can be made to ensure that the individual receives appropriate support and services while incarcerated, ultimately reducing recidivism.[30] According to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, "42% of jobs in 2031 will require at least a bachelor's degree while only 28% will go to workers with a high school diploma or less,"[31] indicating that education is more critical to employment than ever—including for formerly incarcerated people.

Investing in prison libraries is a critical step in providing incarcerated individuals with tools—rather than barriers—to return to their communities better-equipped for life after incarceration.

Prison libraries are an integral resource for supporting successful reentry. Specifically, prison libraries contribute to this goal by supporting mental wellbeing and human dignity, bolstering literacy and educational efforts, offering job skill training and employment information, facilitating the maintenance of family ties during incarceration, and providing incarcerated people with reentry information and resources. In short, the evidence is clear: supporting learning and information access inside prisons pays off on the outside. Yet prison libraries—a cost-effective gateway to literacy and learning—are often severely underfunded and under resourced.

PRISON LIBRARIES
A LOW-PROFILE RESOURCE WITH BIG IMPACT

The Work of Prison Libraries

Prison libraries, via their roles in literacy, lifelong learning, and skills building offer incarcerated people the opportunity to both explore inwardly and transform the ways they will navigate the outside world. Books help people to combat the chronic stress, boredom, and isolation of incarceration—making prisons safer places for staff and incarcerated people. Prison libraries not only amplify the work of formal prison education programs but provide information resources and skills development to the entire prison population. In other words, investing in prison libraries is a critical step in providing incarcerated individuals with tools—rather than barriers—to return to their communities better-equipped for life after incarceration.

Prison Libraries in the U.S.

Carceral libraries in the United States date back to the late eighteenth century, when the Philadelphia Prison Society began providing books to incarcerated people

Successful Prison Library Models

While many parts of the country lack consistent support for carceral libraries, Colorado[32] and Washington State[33] stand out as examples of states that offer centralized, comprehensive library services to prisons. The key to success in these states is the result of long-term partnerships between state libraries and state departments of corrections. Additionally, these states stand out because they provide dedicated library staff and funding to their prison libraries and the services they provide to incarcerated people are designed to replicate services public libraries offer on the outside.

at the Walnut Street jail in Pennsylvania. In more recent history, the *Library Services and Construction Act*, authorized by Congress in 1964, supported the expansion of prison libraries.[34] Additionally, court cases have led to increased support for prison libraries by mandating the provision of on-site libraries (*Wolff v. McDonnell*, 1974, U.S. Supreme Court) and requiring prisons to "provide access to people trained in law or law library collections" (*Stone v. Boone*, 1977, U.S. District Court of Massachusetts).[35] Today, both national[36] and international[37] standards exist to guide prison library management and the value of prison libraries is recognized by UNESCO,[38] among others.

Despite their value, prison libraries in the U.S. are widely under-resourced with vast disparities across facilities, and there are currently no reliable numbers about how many prisons have a well-funded, and staffed library. As of 2010 (the most recent study available), there were about **950 state prison libraries** across the country according to the *Directory of State Prison Librarians*. About one-third of these facilities had **no designated library staff**. Only about half of states had a central prison library coordinator or consultant, employed either by the state library or within the Department of Corrections.[39] Our own more recent estimates show that there are roughly 917 prison libraries located in carceral facilities across the U.S. today —though this count doesn't include all fifty states as not all offer publicly available data.[40] Libraries and library services also exist in carceral institutions beyond prisons, such as jails and juvenile detention centers.

Information Needs of the Incarcerated

Libraries exist to facilitate access to information, and incarcerated people face extreme barriers to information access. Most people in prison have no internet access, and face limits on the type of reading material deemed appropriate.[41] Yet, with limited resources, many prison libraries are only able to provide well-worn books—many of which are donated. Tablets, which allow incarcerated people to send and receive emails, have become more common, though they pose their own limitations[42] and rarely offer meaningful access to books and library services.[43] Beyond tablets, most incarcerated people do not have access to computers, kiosks, smartphones, or other basic information technology used in the outside world. Additionally, non-fiction print materials available in carceral libraries may be severely out of date. Reportedly as of 2021, even in a relatively well-stocked prison library in North Carolina, the encyclopedias dated back to the Carter administration.[44]

While access to information is severely restricted, incarcerated people have significant information needs. An analysis of prisoners' information requests to the New York Public Library's Reference by Mail service revealed that incarcerated people's information requests were clustered around three core themes: self-help, reentry information, and "general reference queries that typically go unanswered due to the lack of access to the Internet and robust general libraries in correctional facilities."[45] If we do not provide people with access to books and information during incarceration, how can we expect them to succeed upon release? In this context it is clear both why efforts to meet the information needs of incarcerated people are critical, and that prison libraries must be better equipped to meet these needs.

How Prison Libraries Reduce Recidivism

As 94% of incarcerated adults in the U.S. will eventually be released from prison, it is critical to support their reentry to society, and libraries have an important role to play.[46] While the factors behind incarceration and recidivism are complex,[47] the Federal Bureau of Prisons has identified interventions in prisons that help promote success after release. This includes addressing mental health and substance abuse, education gaps and job skills, supporting family connections, and equipping people with practical reentry information and resources.[48] Well-resourced prison libraries support

each of these reentry strategies, reaching not just people who elect to participate in formal health or education programs, but the entire prison population.

Mental Health and Self-Help

Mental (as well as physical) health challenges are common among formerly incarcerated individuals. They can make finding and maintaining employment even more difficult and can play a role in recidivism. These challenges are often linked to traumatic experiences early in life as well as exposure to violence,[49] both of which can be exacerbated by time spent in prison.[50] Supporting mental wellbeing in prison through direct and indirect interventions can have important impacts over the long-term.

Jy'Aire Smith-Pennick, who recently had his sentence commuted, speaks to the nature of prison life noting, "To people who are free, our collective boredom may seem minute. But life on the inside isn't so much a physical battle as it is a mental one. It's the little things that begin to chip away at your humanity and take a toll on your psyche."[51] The simple act of providing access to books through prison libraries offers dignity and relief to those behind bars. In the words of Zy'aire Nassirah, who is formerly incarcerated, "Access to books means a lot when you're incarcerated, [they] provide a getaway and support when access to outside family is limited or nonexistent."[52] Or as Megan Sweeney—author of *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*—comments, reading in prison can "counter forces of isolation, abandonment, and dehumanization by serving as an opening to other people, ideas, and the world outside the prison. Furthermore, reading generates possibilities for prisoners to re-envision and rescript their lives."[53] Many incarcerated individuals describe libraries as a "lifeline"—crediting books in prison with influencing, transforming—and even saving—their lives.[54]

Beyond books, well-resourced prison libraries offer programming, such as self-help and creative expression groups that support mental health and self-reflection. As of 2023, the California Men's Colony Libraries, for example, hosted 8–10 prisoner-led self-help groups per week, on topics including Anger Management, Criminal Gangs Anonymous, and Victims Awareness. The library supports its patrons in developing programs

Access to Law Libraries

One of the most important types of information that prison libraries provide to incarcerated people is legal information. This includes information relevant to their rights, their cases, and other legal matters people may need to address while incarcerated, such as custody of children or divorce.[55] There is wide variation in how legal information is provided, including through both law libraries and general reference libraries in prisons, as well as via reference by mail services offered by public libraries and external law libraries.[56] While, "meaningful access to the law is a constitutional right . . . how this right is interpreted by carceral facilities varies."[57] This means that many incarcerated individuals have difficulty accessing the legal information they need. According to the ALA's *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained*, "recreational and legal libraries should be separate spaces within a central location."[58] Currently, many prisons do not meet this standard.

Access to legal information in prison is increasingly being "defined as access to legal databases on tablets or available through kiosks or computers that are not connected to the internet."[59] As of 2020, the entire federal prison system and 45 state correctional systems had switched to access to electronic databases instead of law libraries.[60] Digital access has some benefits, but digital-only access also poses issues such as the varying digital literacy skills of prisoners, lack of computers, out-of-date resources, and institutional surveillance.[61]

Additionally, navigating legal materials can be challenging, and the assistance of trained library staff is critical. Unstaffed spaces can lead to frustration like that recounted by Johanna Danielle Allish, incarcerated in Michigan: "While they provide a legal library, they do not tell us how to use it properly. I spent many hours fumbling for answers with little to show for it."[62] To address the need for assistance, some prison law libraries train incarcerated law clerks who aid their peers in finding and interpreting relevant legal materials. This experience can be transformational, for both the volunteers and those they aid. Darnell Epps, who went on to study at Yale Law School, served 15 years as a prison law library clerk. During that time, he and other clerks aided fellow incarcerated people with legal research that ultimately helped some leave prison.[63]

and by providing relevant resources. These groups are well-attended; from July 2022—Dec 2022, 260 people completed a self-help program.[64] Other prison libraries facilitate prisoner writing groups, speaker series featuring formerly incarcerated people (illustrating that it's possible to thrive after incarceration), book groups, and more.[65] The library at the Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center in Oregon, for one, offers workshops, which use music production to help youth develop their writing skills, process difficult experiences, tell their stories, and express their hopes and dreams.[66]

Access to Education

Research indicates that people who take part in education programs while incarcerated are significantly less likely to return to prison.[67] Specifically, a comprehensive RAND analysis found that incarcerated individuals who participated in educational programs were **43% less likely to return to prison within three years** than those who did not.[68] In concrete terms, this means that **every dollar invested in prison education yields roughly $5** in reduced incarceration costs during the first three years post-release.[69] Other data confirms the dramatic impact of education. For example, the American Correctional Association found that people who completed GEDs while incarcerated in Indiana had a 20% lower rate of recidivism, while those who received college degrees were 44% less likely to return to prison.[71] Additionally, research shows that "increasing literacy rates and strengthening information networks of detained and formerly detained individuals correlates to successful rehabilitation and reentry."[72]

By offering programs for adult literacy and basic skills (including digital literacy), support for those obtaining high school diplomas and post-secondary education, and support for individuals with learning disabilities, prisons and prison libraries can contribute

"We must give individuals the opportunity to see themselves as more than the harm they've caused, more than what was once broken within them. And who knows what is inside of each of us? I, for one, had no idea there was a mentor and writer inside of me."

—Christopher Blackwell, currently incarcerated in Washington State, on the transformative potential of education.[70]

Standards and Research on Prison Libraries

In recent years, multiple efforts have been undertaken by the library community in the United States to support prison library work, research the effectiveness of prison libraries, and share best practices. The following projects are laying the groundwork for standards-based and data-driven decision making about prison libraries and their impact on helping incarcerated people reenter society:

Principles and Standards: The American Library Association (ALA)'s Prisoners' Right to Read: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights statement firmly connects library principles and prisoners' rights.[73] In addition, the ALA's new *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained* were published in 2024, representing a long overdue update to the ALA's previous prison library service standards from 1992.[74]

Best Practices and Professional Support: The Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People Initiative, aims to "identify existing library services for incarcerated people, support professionals in the field in building out or creating new services, . . . develop digital literacy programming for people who are formerly incarcerated and provide guidance for librarians working in juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons nationwide."[75] The project is an initiative of the San Francisco Public Library and the ALA and has been made possible by generous support from the Mellon Foundation.

Research on Library Impact: The Colorado State Library's PRISM Project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), was a research study designed to determine the outcomes of library services in prison. Current and formerly incarcerated people in Colorado's state prisons were surveyed about the impact of prison library services.[76]

While these initiatives are an important beginning, their work has helped make it clear just how dire the lack of access to information and books is for many incarcerated people, as well as how urgent the need is for better data on carceral libraries in the United States.

"They're not just inmates, they're our neighbors, they're our friends, and they're our family members. If your family member came into jail, do you want us to stick them in a cell? Or, while they are here can we teach them, can we give them resources so when they get out, they can alter their decision making to not come back here?"[77]

—Sgt. Adam Hernke, Hennepin County Jail, on the Helping Others by Providing Education (H.O.P.E.) program

to successful reentry. This betters lives, improves public safety, and ultimately reduces costs.

Prison libraries are both a gateway and a complement to other learning. Simply having access to library resources and trained librarians while incarcerated helps spark curiosity and learning. A study of nearly 500 incarcerated people "found that visiting the prison library increased prisoners' involvement in other life-long learning programs."[78] Additionally, libraries support formal educational programs within prisons by providing resources to help students deepen their knowledge on topics ranging from basic computer skills to computer programming, HVAC systems, and environmental sustainability.[79] At the same time prison libraries offer resources for incarcerated people to engage in self-directed learning, encouraging them to explore topics of personal interest and develop skills at their own pace.

Literacy of All Kinds

Even more fundamental than education is literacy. Incarcerated people often enter prison with difficulty reading, and national assessments show that incarcerated people are far more likely to score in the lowest literacy levels than free adults.[80] By providing reading materials at a variety of levels, as well as encouragement and guidance, carceral libraries help people develop this essential life skill. Literacy opens the door to further education and employment and offers a path out of prison. If an individual had difficulty reading before entering prison, how can we expect people to emerge from incarceration successfully if they have no way to prepare themselves within prison walls?

Beyond basic literacy, well-resourced prison libraries can help incarcerated patrons develop information, digital, and financial literacy skills. Despite the general lack of access to technology (like computers) in prisons, prison libraries can serve as important sites for increased digital skills training that helps ease reentry into a technologically sophisticated world. These advanced literacies help people integrate successfully into society, obtain jobs, and protect themselves and their families after reentry. People unfamiliar with the internet—including incarcerated people who have limited or no access to this resource—can fall prey to online get-rich-quick scams upon release. Correctional librarian Adrienne Breznau works to prevent this, and says, it is "my job is to turn them away from information sources, from people trying to scam them."[81]

Jobs and Entrepreneurship

Providing opportunities for people to gain occupational skills and work experience while in prison can help break the prison-poverty cycle by making it easier to find employment after release.[82] In fact, research demonstrates that: "prisoners who are taught valuable skills

Literacy Work at the County Juvenile Hall Library

At the Alameda County Juvenile Hall Library, librarians work to boost literacy and a love for learning among incarcerated teenagers. Many of the youth the library serves are in their late teens (16–17 years old) but have 6th–7th grade reading levels and may have stopped going to school at a young age.

Library staff look for signs that youth have difficulty with literacy, like observing teens who just flip through book pages or state that they are not interested in reading. Librarians then provide one-on-one literacy support as well as reading incentives, such as encouraging kids to read books turned into movies and then hosting a movie day with snacks.

A goal of the library is to expose the youth to other experiences and possibilities through books, showing them that there is more to life than what they are doing, and that there is a future beyond the juvenile hall walls. While this work is challenging, teens who have visited the library have gone on to develop interests in subjects ranging from poetry to quantum physics. This work is critical as 85% of youth in the juvenile justice system have difficulty reading,[83] and for "teens in custody, literacy skills are strongly correlated with a lower chance of recidivism."[84]

Technology Access in Colorado

The Colorado State Library (CSL) provides technology to incarcerated individuals, including Launchpads (tablets pre-loaded with games, books, or educational content), popular gaming platforms like Nintendo Switch, and individual music and DVD players that can be used in the library. The Colorado Department of Corrections Libraries, supported by CSL, also have secure patron-accessible online catalogs where patrons can log into their own accounts, place holds, rate books, request purchases, and more.[85]

and have a job during the time of their incarceration are 24% less likely to recidivate."[86] Important skills can include anything from improving basic reading and writing, to developing computer and technology literacy, to gaining knowledge relevant to a specific field.

Libraries play a central role in helping people learn to use new technologies and integrate them into their work and personal lives. Expanding access to technology in prison libraries would help reduce the economic impact of recidivism by enabling incarcerated individuals to begin the process of reintegrating into the workforce by building digital skills relevant to a wide range of professions. Many people lack these skills due to literacy barriers, or the fact that technology has evolved significantly during the time of their incarceration. Research points to the importance of ensuring that incarcerated people have the possibility to develop digital skills, including those relevant to employment and job-seeking, to succeed in reentry. This is evidenced by findings from a digital literacy program for incarcerated men in New Orleans, where learning how to create resumes and apply for jobs online helped participants see "the possibility for a new and different path in their lives."[87] Similarly, while prison libraries are limited by both resources and regulations in terms of what they can do, they strive to aid people with practical information related to finding employment upon reentering their communities. The Ohio Reformatory for Women, for one, provides reentry computers that allow women to create resumes and search for incarceration-friendly employers through a tailored version of Ohio Means Jobs.[88] After release, women can access the same website "live" to continue their job search. Notably, the library offers just two reentry computers for a population of about 2,300 women,[89] underlining the critical need for additional support for resources like this.

Beyond aiding job searches, adequately staffed libraries can support incarcerated people in conducting research relevant to developing their own businesses post-release.[90] Given the barriers formerly incarcerated people face in finding jobs, self-employment is an option many consider. Reference questions from incarcerated people in New York state included business-related requests such as, "I need to know which innovative environmental technologies are the E.P.A.-SBIR program soliciting proposals for. Is it soliciting proposals for environmentally friendly motors?" And simply, "I would like to receive any other information geared toward small businesses starting a small business."[91] For a population without access to the internet, libraries are a fundamental link to information about the jobs market and business environment—information which is key to success on the outside.

Keeping Families Connected

Incarceration touches the lives of many. In fact, in the United States, one in five people has had a parent incarcerated, and one in seven adults has had an immediate family member spend a year or more in prison or jail.[92] Helping incarcerated people retain close and positive ties with their loved ones while in prison reduces recidivism, increases the likelihood of an individual finding and maintaining employment after release, and eases the harm to family members separated from one another due to incarceration.[93] Libraries connect people through family literacy programs and help them maintain existing connections through shared culture, literature, and art. The Read to the Children program, for one, is available at all Colorado Department of Corrections libraries. This program allows incarcerated people to read a book and record a video to send to a young family member, including to children, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, or siblings.[94] Library family literacy programs like this are a meaningful way for incarcerated parents to have presence in their children's lives. This is especially important for people who are incarcerated in facilities far away from their families or who lack other ways to stay in touch.

Research and personal stories demonstrate the significance of library programs like these. One study

The Impact of Incarceration on Families of Color

People of color are significantly overrepresented in the country's prisons and jails. For example, the number of Native people incarcerated in state and federal prisons per 100,000 people is more than double the national average (763 native people are incarcerated per 100,000, versus 350 per 100,000 for the overall population).[95] Additionally, while Black Americans represent just 14% of the population, they account for 41% of those incarcerated in the U.S.[96] Since a large percentage of incarcerated people have children, this "disproportionately high rate of incarceration means that one in 10 Black children has an incarcerated parent."[97] This creates significant financial, practical, and emotional stress for families and is a contributor to larger patterns of wealth inequality.[98] Former RAND policy researcher Celia Gomez notes, "Incarcerated people are parents, children, aunts and grandparents, and these identities don't stop when people serve a prison sentence. If we care about the well-being of families, then we should attend to *the entire family unit.*"[99] While prison libraries can't erase the pain incarceration causes families, they can offer practical support to keep people connected.

found that, "family connection can facilitate literacy development for children and create a sense of presence even when a parent is incarcerated" and that "incarcerated fathers who participated in a reading program wherein they were filmed reading a book aloud and then able to send the recording and a copy of the book to their child/children described this as materially communicating to their children that they wanted to be present."[100] Further, a survey of participants who took part in a similar prison family reading program in the United Kingdom revealed that the "Storybook Dads" felt they had improved their relationship with their children (97%) and were more confident that they would not reoffend (82%).[101] As Richard Hines-Norwood writes of his experiences parenting while incarcerated, "I know that even when a parent has been part of a child's pain, that parent's love can still be the antidote."[102]

Reentry Information

When leaving prison individuals often need significant information and support to succeed. This can include information about housing, employment opportunities, and healthcare, as well as how to connect with supportive community organizations, and navigate the challenges they may face in society due to having a criminal record.[103] This reentry information may be provided by prison libraries themselves,[104] as well as in collaboration with public libraries.[105]

To learn more specifically about how libraries support reentry post-release please see the American Library Association Policy Perspectives paper, "Libraries and Reentry: The Importance of Public Spaces, Technologies, and Community to Formerly Incarcerated Patrons" by Katelyn Ringrose, 2020.

Public libraries are available to pick up where prison libraries leave off, aiding formerly incarcerated individuals with reentry after their release. This includes providing individuals with community resource guides both

Library Partnerships

Due to the lack of investment in prison libraries, some public libraries supplement and provide additional support to carceral libraries through services such as interlibrary loan, reference by mail services, and reentry resources. Partnerships like these are part of the DNA of libraries and should be encouraged. Community-based groups also provide books and information to incarcerated people.[106] These groups help expand the resources prison libraries have to offer to their patrons due to the current lack of funding and investments. For example, the Ohio Reformatory for Women, which has approximately 4,000 books for a population of about 2,300 women, partners with a local public library to provide additional materials via interlibrary loan.[107] Meanwhile, in Missouri, the St. Louis County Public Library "provides over 1,000 virtual, asynchronous library programs to people incarcerated in the Missouri Department of Corrections, which facility staff download from the Library's online video platform."[108] The library also offers a reference by mail service serving people in correctional facilities across the state.

Donation-only collections are often heavy in classics or bestsellers of the past and frequently do not reflect the diversity or tastes of those who are incarcerated. Having titles that reflect the lived experiences of incarcerated people encourages reading and advances literacy.

pre- and post-release, offering job seeking support, digital literacy training, referrals to supportive organizations, as well as access to computers, the internet, and basic social services. Some public libraries also bring programs and services into carceral facilities that lack libraries. This said, the work of public libraries should always supplement rather than supplant in-facility prison library resources, since the comprehensive services that adequately staffed and funded prison libraries provide can most effectively meet people where they are.

In sum, prison libraries are a critical resource, impacting several areas key to successful reentry. What's more, when they exist, these libraries are a highly used and appreciated resource.[109] A Washington State Library employee notes that "the average rate of registered users in the prison branches of the Institutional Library Services (ILS) is about 80%. Our branches are used—a lot. . . . It is easy to undervalue libraries or completely overlook their importance, but their absence is always felt."[110] In short, even modest funds invested in carceral libraries have the potential to reach across the country's incarcerated population—changing lives and communities.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR PRISON LIBRARIES

Prison libraries are places of opportunity and skill development for incarcerated people. Despite the important role they play, prison libraries typically face many challenges, including a lack of funding, widely differing levels of access to resources, and navigating the balance between privacy and security—including complying with institutional censorship policies.

Significant Gaps in Resources and Quality

Too often, any collection of books within a prison is referred to as a library—whether it is a closet of donated Reader's Digest classics, a cart tucked in the corner of a living area, or something closer to the offerings of a rural public library. Quality and access vary enormously by location. For example, one analysis found that there was significant disparity between the amount and availability of reading material in Georgia state prison libraries: "Baldwin State Prison Library, for example, offers fewer than 2,000 books for about 1,000 prisoners, about one tenth the offering of comparably sized Central State Prison in Macon. Four prisons have libraries with at least 10 books per person. Another four have less than four per person." The analysis also found a lack of titles on significant African American leaders even though nearly two-thirds of people incarcerated in Georgia are Black.[111]

Some states and facilities do invest in libraries: for example, Colorado,[112] New York,[113] and Washington State[114] offer centralized library services to prisons. But in other jurisdictions, incarcerated people rely solely on outside volunteers or book-donation programs to access reading material, and budget and policy differences produce stark gaps. For instance, one Nebraska prison librarian reported their entire materials budget was **only $1,000 per year**—"barely enough to maintain what's being worn out."[115] In Pennsylvania's Allegheny County Jail, the "leisure library" consists of "a couple dozen old books with ripped and missing pages."[116] By contrast, a proactive superintendent in New York state "made it possible to broaden what was available in [a corrections] library" to include, multiple newspapers and magazine subscriptions, as well as film and book discussion programs.[117] These anecdotes illustrate that a facility's library quality can depend on chance and leadership. Nationwide, there is no consistent baseline: some prisons have only the most basic offerings, while others may have well-stocked general libraries.

The American Library Association's newly revised *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated and Detained* can help guide the development of quality prison libraries. The standards make detailed

"Why was the library we had access to so limited in scope, when it could have been such a bigger portal to the world? . . . Exploring the world beyond yourself is the only way to repair the world within."[118]

—Brian Scott, formerly incarcerated, on prison libraries

Prison Library Service in Colorado

Unlike many prison libraries, Colorado's state prison libraries meet federal and ALA *Standards* and provide an achievable model for other states to follow.[119] State prisons receive funding for library services from both the Colorado State Library (CSL) and the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC). This supports both a law library and community libraries, which are housed and staffed separately. In total, the Colorado State Library's Institutional Library Development unit serves about 30,000 people residing in 40 state-funded institutions, including prisons, and follows a public library model with patron services.[120]

According to the ALA *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated and Detained,*[121] "The annual library materials allocation for carceral libraries should be based on facility operational capacity and calculated per capita based on the following amounts adjusted for inflation:

- $4.00 per capita = minimal
- $13.00 per capita = basic
- $28.00 per capita = exceptional"

In Colorado carceral library allocations have increased from "minimal" to $13.00 per person and the state aims to increase funding to the "exceptional" level of $28.00. As noted in the ALA *Standards*, "The increase is easy to justify, based on usage statistics alone. Almost every CDOC resident uses the facility library."[122]

recommendations for access, administration, staffing, budget, facilities, programs and services, materials, and assessment in carceral libraries. According to the ALA *Standards*, at minimum a prison library should have a dedicated space, a budget for acquiring new materials, trained library staff, and provide regular library access to information for everyone in the facility.[123]

Funding and Staffing

Most prison libraries are chronically underfunded. Library funds are often cut from state corrections budgets during downturns,[124] and there are only a few federal grant programs aimed at this need. One former prison librarian notes, "Perhaps one of the biggest hurdles for a prison librarian is money. Most of the time, the prison library is low on the list of the prison's priorities and is overlooked."[125] Prison libraries must typically make a little go a long way, supplementing their collections by seeking book donations and collaborating both formally and informally with outside libraries and groups.

Staffing is also a hurdle. Retaining library professionals in corrections is a challenge, and high security requirements make recruiting and maintaining outside volunteers or contractors a slow process every time there is a vacancy. Many libraries are partly staffed by incarcerated workers, which can provide valuable work experience and service, but also has limits. Researchers found that the prison libraries they studied "lack the staffing and financing to deliver all the services their patrons need."[126] Similarly, library staff report that prison libraries are low on the list of administrative priorities.[127] When budgets tighten or contracts end, libraries are among the first to be cut.

Content Restrictions

Incarcerated patrons often must contend with censorship. A recent PEN America report warns that **in prisons "censorship is rising steeply,"** depriving incarcerated people of quality reading material.[128] Thousands of titles are banned outright in many state systems (ranging from

Federal Funding Cuts

Notably, until recently, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) distributed *Grants to States* to provide dedicated funding to support libraries across the country. This funding supported books, digital materials, literacy programs, and library staff in prison libraries. In early 2025, however, a new federal order abruptly ended IMLS grants, leaving some prison libraries scrambling. As one report noted, state libraries such as the Washington State Library were using IMLS funds to support branch libraries in state prisons;[129] these programs are now imperiled. While, as of publication of this report, some funding to states has been restored, uncertainty remains. IMLS is essential to supporting the reentry work of prison libraries and without this federal funding, prison libraries stand to face further staffing cuts to full-time librarians, program closure, or even program elimination.

Voices from Inside: The Human Impact

The need for better prison libraries is underscored by stories from those in the system. Derek Trumbo, an incarcerated writer in Kentucky, put it bluntly: the prison library shelves hold "only Westerns, romance and pulp novels," books from which "there's not much one can glean" for self-improvement.[130] Yet when libraries work well, they can transform lives. Chris Wilson, "probably spent more than 10,000 hours" in the library while incarcerated in Maryland. He says, "I didn't just live *for* that library. I lived *because* of that library. The Patuxent prison library saved me from crushing despair."[131] Meanwhile, Christopher Blackwell, an incarcerated author, recounted how taking college classes (through the University Beyond Bars program) changed him. He earned an associate's degree and saw classmates, once "lacking confidence," become voracious learners sitting "in the prison dayrooms—books open, calculators out—studying math and political science." His message: giving educational opportunities—which libraries are an integral part of—to prisoners is **"the single most effective way to reduce recidivism."**[132] Such personal accounts remind us that prison libraries are not abstract luxuries; to incarcerated individuals, they are often a *lifeline* to hope, knowledge, and a different future.

religious texts to political memoirs), narrowing what libraries can shelve.[133] Reasons given for censoring materials include security and contraband concerns. Yet often these concerns don't make sense. Kimberly Hricko, incarcerated in Maryland, notes that a *Game of Thrones* book was "withheld because it contained maps." While maps of areas surrounding prisons are contraband, the maps in the book are fictional, providing no practical risk.[134] Censorship imposes a high cost on prison libraries as it requires staff time to enact and leads to the removal of books without ensuring any means of replacing those lost resources.

Many times, censorship can occur due to other institutional issues such as lack of staff.[135] Institutional censorship is often done ad hoc by staff in busy mailrooms or only directed by overbroad censorship policies that prison staff are not trained to interpret. Incarcerated people are frustrated in their search for adequate reading materials when books are banned and confiscated for vague and unpredictable reasons, with prisons only having to cite "security" concerns to abridge intellectual freedom. The cost to human dignity is often expressed by those who experience this kind of arbitrary loss, like Martin Lizarragar: "Books are my escape, and I'm constantly denied even that."[136]

The benefits reading provides incarcerated people are so well-proven that denying books should happen rarely, and only when the content is a direct threat to safety and security. ALA's *Standards for Library Services to the Incarcerated or Detained* provides detailed guidance on creating less arbitrary censorship policies for prison libraries, including providing staff training, allowing appeals, and communicating decisions clearly and in a timely manner. Books are not the problem; they are the solution. As librarian Michael Lambert notes, "Low literacy and barriers to education contribute to the prison pipeline, and having access to information and library services can change the trajectory of someone's life."[137]

Practical Barriers

Besides being chronically under-resourced and facing censorship, there are other challenges that arise for prison libraries and library work inherent to a carceral environment. This includes obstacles, like libraries being closed randomly for safety or disciplinary measures. Or the fact that librarians are, at times, called on to perform the tasks of correctional officers.[138] Additionally, one study highlighted the challenges that many prison libraries can face when trying to bring in more resources through partnerships: "For prison libraries, an individual state's department of corrections plays a key role in determining many aspects of facility libraries, including hours, budgets, staffing, and technology available. Staff at these facilities change frequently and are in short supply, often limiting the ability to form outside partnerships. Often operated by staff who are themselves incarcerated, prison libraries are limited in different ways in their ability to connect or partner with outside organizations."[139] All these challenges compound to create a sparse library experience for most incarcerated people.

In sum, many U.S. prisons do provide some library access at present, but many so-called libraries are little more than a few dusty shelves, often not managed by trained library workers. Thus, some prisons have libraries worthy of the name, but many others have only minimal or nonexistent services. This means that many

Congressional Support: Prison Libraries Act of 2023

Recent efforts in Congress recognize the importance of increased investment in prison libraries and the important role prison libraries play in reentry. Representatives Emanuel Cleaver II (MO-05), Shontel Brown (OH-11), and the late Shelia Jackson Lee (TX-18) introduced the Prison Libraries Act of 2023, the first ever Congressional bill on prison libraries. If passed, the Act would have established a competitive grant program within the Department of Justice to provide library services to incarcerated individuals to advance reintegration efforts, reduce recidivism, and increase educational opportunities.[140]

Grants would support education and job training, access to and updating of materials, expansion of prison libraries, hiring of qualified librarians, and other services. This legislation is an important first step toward providing much needed financial support to prison libraries. Despite this important acknowledgement of prison libraries at the federal level, greater awareness, understanding, and education about prison libraries is needed.

incarcerated people have no real access to a meaningful library and the expertise of librarians.

BIPARTISAN BENEFITS
BUILDING SKILLS AND REDUCING COSTS

For incarcerated individuals, the road to gaining adequate access to basic information and skills pertinent to their lives, and their futures is often littered with obstacles. Prison libraries contribute to lower recidivism rates and yield positive social and economic outcomes by better preparing incarcerated people for their release. Prison libraries are therefore a critical investment. Yet, due to inadequate resources, many prison libraries are operating at a much lower level than their potential, which means that we are missing out on a meaningful opportunity to reduce recidivism further. With adequate funding, standardization, and support, prison libraries can be a vital resource that can shape outcomes for millions of Americans, preparing individuals for employment and career pathways, social and family engagement, and agency. Providing prison libraries with much needed investments such as funding and trained professional staff will ultimately help strengthen the workforce and communities, as well as save valuable public funds by ensuring that those who leave prison stay out. This benefits both the returned person and the community they are returning to.

Prison libraries across the country already make meaningful contributions daily, but with added support, coordination, and standardization they have the potential to have an even greater impact on incarcerated people, their families, and communities. To do this, prison libraries need help—from policymakers and philanthropists, as well as library and human rights advocates, and the carceral community. We call on the aforementioned groups to assist in the following ways:

ACTION ITEMS
FOR POLICYMAKERS, ADVOCATES, PHILANTHROPISTS, AND THE CARCERAL COMMUNITY

- **Support federal-level prison library investments.** Commend Representative Emanuel Cleaver II (MO-05) and his colleagues on the Prison Libraries Act as an excellent beginning for Congressional support and funding for prison libraries. Advocates should support this bill and amendments to strengthen it even further. Modest investments such as those envisioned by the Prison Libraries Act could create enormous value.
- **Encourage expanded philanthropic support.** Urge philanthropic entities to fund efforts that promote awareness and understanding of the role of prison libraries, including the development of a framework for systematic data collection about prison libraries.
- **Boost public awareness.** Increase understanding and awareness about the critical role prison libraries play in education, skill building, workforce development, and overall successful reentry. Encourage

library advocates to continue to promote the work and contributions of prison libraries.

- **Expand research efforts.** Conduct research to identify existing programs and regulations in the federal government that may be leveraged to increase support for prison libraries. Collect data on library usage, and recidivism outcomes. Fund research to quantify how specific library improvements translate into lower rearrest rates, helping to refine best practices.
- **Adopt standards.** Adopt the ALA *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated and Detained* as a baseline for best practice. Lack of consistent guidelines, standards, and reporting mechanisms is a barrier to data-driven decision making.
- **Leverage existing partnerships.** Build upon existing relationships and coordinate with groups and external stakeholders currently providing services and support to incarcerated people to bolster what prison libraries can offer.

By acting on these steps, stakeholders can help ensure that prison libraries are a robust and cost-effective pillar of reentry strategy.

CONCLUSION

In the most practical terms, prison libraries are an **investment in skill building and fiscal prudence**. They provide valuable programs and services, transforming idle time into learning time, turning a recidivism problem into an opportunity for growth. This report has shown that those who engage in education while incarcerated are less likely to reoffend, that every dollar for prison education pays for itself in reduced incarceration, and that we have the potential to reap meaningful economic and social returns by prioritizing learning through prison libraries. Conversely, neglecting prison libraries means squandering human potential and taxpayer dollars. Providing professional library services to incarcerated individuals ensures that people are equipped with essential support and skills building for future employment and education goals. In sum, by increasing investments in prison libraries in the United States, we have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of incarcerated individuals, which can contribute to successful reentry—ultimately benefiting a wide range of families and communities across the nation.

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