



Libraries & Reentry

The Importance of Public Spaces, Technologies, and Community to Formerly Incarcerated Patrons

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Abstract

Everyone deserves access to opportunity, including individuals navigating reentry after experiencing incarceration. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, each year, more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons within the United States and 9 million are released from jail. Libraries provide access to an array of programs and services offered by government agencies, for-profits, and nonprofits. Libraries connect patrons who have experienced incarceration with the resources to learn computer skills, improve literacy, attain degrees, gain access to substance abuse meetings, and more. From assisting individuals affected by the opioid crisis to providing patrons with opportunities to use computers and reconnect with their families, libraries are places of opportunity that increase the success rate of reentry. This potential can be realized only with increased funding for library programming and policy-maker awareness on the benefits that libraries offer.

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Introduction

With so many of our nation's individuals behind bars or returning to society from being incarcerated, libraries are in a unique position to provide reentry services.

For incarcerated persons, books have long served as windows into different worlds. They represent hope and intellectual freedom. Upon their release, formerly incarcerated patrons should feel at home in their local library. Literacy, library, and education services are essential for preparing people to return to their families and communities. Libraries should work to restore autonomy and help ease the marginalization faced by formerly incarcerated people, and they already do so by operating as spaces where diversity and inclusion are celebrated.

Through the use of technologies, information resources, educational courses, and community groups, formerly incarcerated patrons should see libraries as

spaces of opportunity, where librarians function as non-judgmental expert guides.

"Libraries & Reentry: The Importance of Public Spaces, Technologies and Community to Formerly Incarcerated Patrons" explores the myriad ways that libraries support the formerly incarcerated, as well as ways in which policy-makers can support libraries.

I hope that the ideas and programs explored in this paper inspire librarians and policy-makers to develop new ways for libraries to solve issues arising from mass incarceration. I encourage readers of this paper to support further studies on how libraries can help lower the cost of recidivism, and provide better and more robust programming for formerly incarcerated library patrons in their reentry process.

Libraries welcome and serve all patrons, regardless of conviction status.

Wanda Brown

ALA President, 2019–2020

KEY TERMS

This paper uses language pertaining to incarceration and library services. We have provided definitions for key terms. We acknowledge that many of these terms have more than one meaning due to the way that language reflects implicit assumptions.

Censorship: the suppression or prohibition of information contained in books, films, news, and other media.

Conviction Status: an individual's recorded convictions.

Correctional Librarian: an individual who provides library services to incarcerated patrons.

Detainment: the act of keeping an individual in custody, either before, during, or following a trial.

Digital Literacy: an individual's ability to find, evaluate, use, and compose clear information on various digital platforms.

Discrimination: prejudicial treatment of people often due to their perceived racial, sexual, gender, conviction, or other status.

Incarceration: the act of being confined to a prison or jail.

Jail: a space where individuals are confined after being accused or convicted of a crime. Jails are usually local facilities under the jurisdiction of a city, local district, or county.

Juvenile Detention: a space where individuals under the age of majority are confined after being accused or convicted of a crime.

Marginalization: the treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or peripheral.

Policy-makers: individuals involved in local, state, or federal government who create and implement policy decisions that affect others.

Prison: a space that confines individuals after they have been convicted of a crime. Prisons are usually under state or federal jurisdiction.

Recidivism: the reincarceration of an individual following their release from prison or jail.

Reentry: the process of entering society after leaving prison or jail.

Reentry Services: local and state resources tailored to aid individuals leaving prison or jail.

Restoration of Voting Rights: the act of registering adults to vote who have had their rights impeded by legislation limiting voter eligibility.

Transitional Housing: temporary housing for individuals leaving prison or jail.

I. OVERVIEW

How do Libraries and Librarians Advocate for Individuals within the Reentry Process?

While the United States represents about 4.4% of the world's population, the country houses around 22% of the world's incarcerated population.¹ Each year, more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons within the United States and 9 million are released from jail.² While almost all incarcerated individuals are released back to their communities at some point, few remain free.³ In fact, over two-thirds of recently released individuals are rearrested within three

years, and over five-sixths are rearrested within nine years. The threat of rearrest and reincarceration is most acute during the first year following release.⁴ Libraries and librarians are in a position, alongside local nonprofits, to offer aid during the most critical stages of reentry.

Library systems help patrons who have experienced incarceration learn computer skills, improve literacy, attain degrees, gain access to substance abuse meetings, and more.⁵ Libraries can play an important role in repairing the damage done by incarceration to relationships between family members, including repairing bonds between parents and children. Libraries

and librarians have been at the forefront of crisis intervention, including assisting individuals affected by the opioid crisis and responding to the mental and physical health needs of their patrons.⁶ Libraries also provide diversionary activities that help to reduce stress. As technology hubs, libraries provide patrons with opportunities to use computers and other devices, such as laptops, tablets, ebook readers and access online resources such as library catalogs, research databases, ebooks, social media, etc. In addition to providing device and internet access, libraries teach digital literacy through classes, instructional materials, one-on-one assistance, and more. While a successful reentry is often categorized as one that does not entail future incarceration, libraries offer services to help all formerly incarcerated persons, whether they experience detention again or not.⁷

The cyclical effects of the criminal justice system hold many recently released individuals and their families prisoner to poverty and its associated harms. Many

incarcerated individuals have families to support, as over 2.7 million American children have at least one parent in prison or jail.⁸ Incarceration also imposes a significant economic burden. Being in prison even once negatively impacts a formerly incarcerated individual's ability to find and maintain gainful employment.⁹ Less than one-half of all released individuals are able to secure a job following their return to society.¹⁰ By providing resources that formerly incarcerated individuals desperately need, libraries can help reduce recidivism rates—thereby supporting families, strengthening communities, and saving taxpayer money.

This paper looks to how library systems currently support individuals who have been incarcerated, and how libraries can better serve formerly incarcerated patrons in the future. The paper concludes with recommendations for librarians and policy-makers on the intersections of librarianship and the criminal justice system.

II. THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION

Increasing Accessibility Through Registering Voters, Issuing Identification Cards, and More

Small changes to library systems can make book and resource lending more accessible to individuals experiencing poverty or homelessness following a period of incarceration. Minimizing or suspending late fees altogether, as well as stopping the practice of asking for proof of residence or a photo ID to get a library card, are two simple ways that libraries can make their services more accessible—practices that are increasingly commonplace in libraries.

Elliot Warren, acting director of library services at the Berkeley Public Library, notes that Berkeley's practice of issuing Easy Access Cards, which do not ask for proof of residence, "removes any value judgment or need for some institutional authority to approve getting a library card and works for many people under quite varied conditions; homelessness, lack of current documentation, people in transition, teens in foster care, and so on . . ." ¹¹ It is important to mitigate the barriers

that impoverished or homeless individuals face when it comes to visiting their libraries. Such barriers include:

1. Library card or access policies requiring a permanent address.
2. Prohibitive fines, fees, or other penalties, or the perception that services incur fees.
3. Staff who are uncomfortable with or who are not trained to work with people who are experiencing poverty or homelessness.
4. Limited promotion of library services at community centers and organizations (food banks, shelters, after-school programs, etc.) which serve people experiencing poverty or homelessness.
5. Restricted access to the library building as a result of limited access to transportation or incompatible service hours.
6. Lack of programs or resources that address people's experiences or current situations.¹²

Breaking down library barriers to serving impoverished or homeless patrons will invariably aid formerly

incarcerated persons, as this population is disproportionately affected by both poverty and homelessness. Mitigation or eradication of the typical reasons why formerly incarcerated patrons may feel unwelcome at their local libraries is a necessary first step when it comes to serving all patrons, in addition to creating programming that will make a difference when it comes to reentry.

In places where individuals with a felony record can have their right to vote restored, formerly incarcerated persons can often register to vote at their local library.¹³ Voter restoration is a massive local and national undertaking, and libraries can help ease the burden by providing a physical location whereby individuals can register. In addition to providing voter signups within the library, librarians can consider hosting voting drives at local prisons and jails for incarcerated individuals who wish to contribute their voice to the democratic process. The San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) held a voter registration drive alongside the San Francisco Reentry Council for communities impacted by policing and incarceration.¹⁴ Incarcerated persons, and individuals on probation or otherwise affected by their conviction status, are disproportionately impacted by laws regarding criminality, voting, housing, and more. Libraries are in a unique position to offer support to these community members.

Community Building

The New York Public Library (NYPL) issues an annual free guide for formerly incarcerated persons called *Connections*.¹⁵ *Connections* provides readers with information about local housing resources; career and educational resources (including adult literacy and computer literacy courses); information about financial and health assistance; as well as information regarding where to find legal resources.¹⁶



Connections also provides information on resources like hotlines and community centers relevant to specific populations such as immigrants, persons with disabilities, women, youth, and the elderly.¹⁷ Guides like *Connections* exist in libraries across the nation, and can be enormously helpful to

individuals reintegrating into their communities following a period of incarceration.

NYPL receives many letters of thanks, and one writer said the following: “After my friend handed me this *Connections* book, oh lord! There’s so many people, organizations and agencies that are willing to help pave a better life and future for men and women who come home from prison. I haven’t put my pen down yet. I’m writing everyone in hopes to connect with the outside world. I want to leave a positive legacy for my children.”¹⁸

Libraries are spaces where patrons can take part in diversionary, stress-relieving, and educational activities, free of judgement and cost. One public library in Fayetteville, Arkansas, hosts free yoga classes every Monday. Libraries across the country, including several in Marin County, California,¹⁹ are establishing gardening programs as ways of helping patrons relax by working with their hands. The NYPL system, for example, has thousands of DVDs available for library patrons to borrow for free.²⁰ Programs and resources like these can help increase a patron’s autonomy, help them deal with stress in productive ways, and allow them to engage in activities that would otherwise be cost-prohibitive. Connecting patrons to diversionary activities, as well as to other resources within the community, is one important way libraries act as a community hub.

Helping to Remedy the Effects of Marginalization and Discrimination

Libraries serve as spaces where diversity and inclusion are celebrated, and where many voices can come together to speak to their varied experiences. Already marginalized populations are disproportionately represented in prison populations, and library systems address this diversity through their collections, programming, and hiring choices.²¹

Librarians, both in and out of the prison system, can work to provide resources to diverse formerly and currently incarcerated persons.²² One such example is the way that public libraries often serve as welcoming spaces for previously incarcerated lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer-identifying (LGBTQ) individuals looking for community and acceptance.

Meaningful reform cannot be accomplished without acknowledging the racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender, and ableist disparities within the criminal justice



A branch of the DC Public Library celebrated Pride Month by showcasing books written about the LGBTQ experience on a table adorned with hearts near the front of the library.

system. Because of concentrations of poverty and imprisonment in certain jurisdictions, entire communities experience the negative effects of mass incarceration.

In America's general population, in 2016, 62% of individuals were non-Hispanic white; 13% were African American; and 17% were Hispanic. However, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 35% of state inmates are white, 38% are African American, and 21% are Hispanic. African American individuals are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is over five times the imprisonment of non-Hispanic white persons.²³

According to the Disability Visibility Project, in an article titled *Collecting [a] home for Disability Justice in the Library*, "disability exists across all communities, but is more prominent and pronounced throughout those that are marginalized."²⁴ Libraries are spaces whereby many voices, including the voices of authors, can come together to create a multifaceted collection. Books about individuals who have experienced incarceration and books that are written by and about individuals of color, LGBTQ persons, and disabled individuals are important to include in both public and prison library collections. As the Disability Visibility Project states: "Building a system where the collection is built by many and not by a few, is a practice of multiplicity and is infinitely

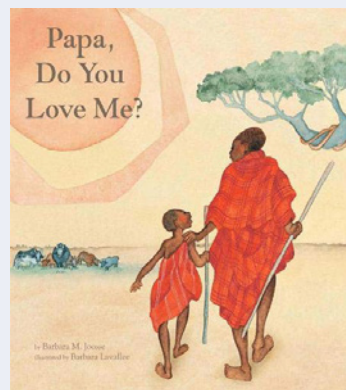
expansive to how we can find ourselves and each other within the library."²⁵

Additionally, a lack of diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, age, ability, and so on in the librarian profession itself can serve to distance librarians from the communities they serve. ALA's Spectrum Scholarship Program is aimed at encouraging more people of color to become librarians.²⁶ The Public Library Association's Inclusive Internship Initiative also offers paid, summer-long internships to high school students from diverse backgrounds at their local public library. Diverse librarians who are better able to represent and connect with their communities through shared or similar experiences can bring new perspectives to the profession.

Limiting the Effects of Incarceration on Children

Libraries offer chances for families impacted by incarceration to maintain connections and reforge bonds. The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), for example, offers library-hosted video visitation for families separated by incarceration.²⁷ BPL provides a monthly training program called "Daddy & Me, Mommy & Me" which teaches early literacy skills to parents in the justice system and helps them learn how they can play a role in their children's educational development from afar. Each participant in the program is invited to read and record a favorite story to be passed on to their family members. Programs like these help strengthen families and parent-child connections.

Jason Dixon, whose story is outlined below in regards to his career as a software engineer, served



One of the books read by an inmate at Rikers Island through the NYPL's Daddy & Me reading program, in which incarcerated fathers record themselves reading stories to their children.

seven years in a medium security prison in Somerset, Pennsylvania.²⁸ His daughter was a toddler when he went to prison, and nine when he was released. Dixon notes that while he was incarcerated, he participated in a reading project where he was allowed to record himself reading three children's books to his daughter. Dixon states, "I read a book about a monkey, and I did it over and over until I was super animated. Inmates don't act like that, you have to be very stoic, but I turned into a drunk Mr. Rogers, dancing and singing over the tape. My daughter loved it, she was only three or four at the time, and her mother said she would play it over and over, to the point where she would lose her mind if someone turned it off, because it was so engaging for her." Post-incarceration parenting can be largely influenced by the parenting that occurs during a period of incarceration. Programs like these affect parents and children during, and long after, periods of incarceration.

Juvenile detainees struggle with reentry in a myriad of ways that can differ significantly from the challenges adults face. A Washington, DC-based nonprofit called the Free Minds Book Club works with juvenile detainees to help them not only experience the power of reading, but also the power of writing and expression. The club, which was founded by two friends, Kelli Taylor and Tara Libert in 2002, began as a simple reading project for a small group of youth.²⁹ Taylor noted that the earliest challenge the group faced was to "find the books that would wake kids up

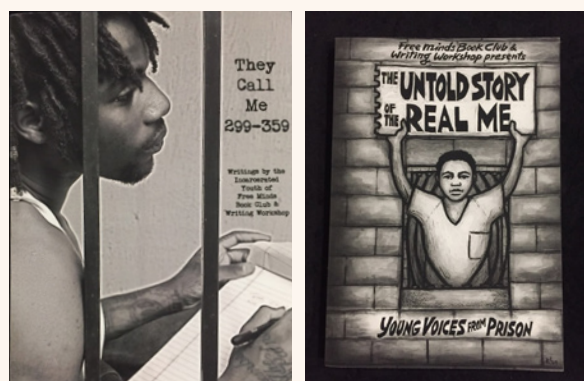
to the power of reading."³⁰ The club now has over 500 members, and the group sends out a monthly newsletter to former book club members with updates on what they are currently reading, as well as observations from their monthly writing prompts. Taylor notes that their goal is consistency, "[we want them to] stay in touch, so they know they can always contact us."³¹

The Free Minds Book Club offers chances for young people to write about their own experiences with incarceration.³² The book club also offers a "Write Night" where community members are invited to come and read the youths' work. According to Taylor, the most moving moments at Write Night occur when members of the community, separated by socio-economic status or other factors, identify with a young person's experience. Through shared experiences, she notes, "we are able to reinforce our connections and see the humanity in one another."³³ Free Minds Book Club works with librarians to identify literature that formerly incarcerated youth may have an interest in, and helps form bonds between young people and the public libraries in their communities. Working with local nonprofits such as Free Minds Book Club is one important way that libraries can provide meaningful service to formerly incarcerated patrons.

Offering Aid in Times of Crisis

The psychological consequences of incarceration can interfere with the transition from prison to home, impede a formerly incarcerated person's successful reintegration into a social network and employment setting, and may compromise a parent's ability to resume his or her role within their family. The impacts of incarceration are also felt in communities that receive large numbers of formerly incarcerated persons. Such communities are not only faced with the task of reintegrating individuals into work and community life, but also are expected to absorb the high level of trauma many bring home with them.³⁴

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) notes that about one in every five individuals leaving prison are forced into homelessness.³⁵ Formerly incarcerated individuals often need access to housing, which may be provided by public housing or transitional housing like homeless shelters. Alternatively, formerly incarcerated persons may need support in reaching out



These two books of poems were written by currently and formerly incarcerated youth through the Free Minds Book Club, focusing on their experiences with detention.

to family members to arrange a place to stay, and they may also need immediate access to healthcare. According to ALA's outreach resources, "People experiencing poverty or homelessness constitute a significant portion of users in many libraries today and this population provides libraries with an important opportunity to change lives."³⁶

Libraries and librarians have a history of serving as positive forces during times of disaster or crisis. The national opioid issue is one such crisis; it reaches not only into homes, but also into public spaces. In one Philadelphia library, for example, a librarian has described four separate overdose cases that have happened during her shifts.³⁷ Philadelphia is by no means alone in its struggle with the opioid epidemic. In regards to crisis prevention, the Richland Library in South Carolina introduced social work services in 2014. The library offers in-house consultations with library patrons, educational opportunities for the incarcerated, health literacy programming, and staff training.

Amy Schofield, Richland (S.C.) Library Community Outreach Manager, notes that "most public librarians have had to accept limits in assisting patrons in crisis. Having social workers as an option is a huge relief to staff who often want to help but are not sure how. Social work skills have also found their way into staff trainings on extremely important issues, such as dealing with patrons in crisis, handling situations where children and vulnerable adults are in danger, and even self-care, issues that every public librarian faces but are not covered in our library training."³⁸

Libraries across the nation have begun to adopt tools and processes used by social workers. Libraries also collaborate with social workers, other community health agencies, and nonprofits to connect people with much-needed resources.³⁹ Libraries offer many benefits to formerly incarcerated persons, and those positive effects touch not just individuals, but entire communities.

III. THE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF RECIDIVISM

The National Scale

When developing new or revised initiatives to support the reentry process, policy-makers should include libraries. With 117,000 locations across the nation, expert staff, technical infrastructure, community programs, information services, and connection with other local agencies, libraries are already well-situated to serve as partners in this work. New initiatives designed to aid individuals who are or have experienced incarceration, as well as their family members, can be implemented cost-effectively by leveraging existing community assets like libraries. Libraries can work with other stakeholders to help reduce recidivism and support families and communities.

Among other things, the economic costs of reincarceration are high.⁴⁰ Taxpayers pay for roughly half of the services associated with recidivist events, including law enforcement costs; court costs; as well as the costs associated with reincarceration and/or community supervision. Crime victims also cover roughly one-third of the costs of recidivism, either directly through medical

bills and legal fees, or indirectly through lost wages, productivity, etc. In order for librarians to serve as expert guides, for social workers to utilize libraries as workspaces, and for libraries to serve as social hubs and career centers, libraries need only funds to cover incremental costs.

The price of incarceration is on the rise: It cost \$34,704 to house a federal inmate in 2016 and \$36,299 in 2017.⁴¹

Federal dollars are not the only ones at stake. A 2018 study found that each recidivist event costs the state of Illinois \$151,662.⁴² According to the state, the cycle of recidivism represents additional costs to the system which accumulate over time. Illinois estimates that recidivism alone will cost the state over \$13 billion during the next five years. In this context, Illinois has suggested adopting a cost-benefit analysis when it comes to creating tax-funded anti-recidivism measures.⁴³ The state encourages the continued adoption of evidence-based recidivism prevention programs. The programs Illinois

references vary in size, type, and scope, but are marked by four key characteristics: first, they are consistent; second, they are of high quality; third, they are well-evaluated; and fourth, they are well-funded. Like the state of Illinois, policy-makers should evaluate the cost of recidivism to their communities, and recognize library programming as a viable way to address the social and economic issues associated with reincarceration.

According to the Executive Office of the President, educational programming must achieve only a 2% reduction in recidivism in order to be cost effective.⁴⁴ R Street Institute, a public policy research organization with a program focused on criminal justice, is a proponent of dismantling the stigma associated with criminal records, which makes obtaining employment difficult for the formerly incarcerated.⁴⁵ According to members of the Criminal Justice and Civil Liberties team at R Street, “We know that robust educational programs are key to reducing crime both inside and outside of our prisons.”⁴⁶ According to a joint project by the Rand Corporation and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, educational programming within jails and prisons translates to “a reduction in the risk of recidivating of 13 percentage points for those who participate in correctional education programs versus those who did not We found that the direct costs of reincarceration were far greater than the direct costs of providing correctional education.”⁴⁷ With such social and economic returns, policy-makers should see the programming, such as the educational, vocational, and diversionary programs offered by libraries, as a way to both effect positive change in their communities and reduce costs.

The New Jersey State Library received \$628,774 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for a project on the formerly incarcerated and libraries.⁴⁸ The IMLS-funded project, Reconnecting Returning Citizens with their Communities at Public Libraries, has the long-term goal of developing a model for public libraries to serve formerly incarcerated persons in diverse communities across the United States.⁴⁹ Peggy Cadigan, Deputy State Librarian for Innovation and Strategic Partnership for the New Jersey State Library, found that New Jersey’s formerly incarcerated library patrons were encountering “one obstacle after another, including getting a [driver’s] license to get to their job, getting to their job, finding housing, and becoming better parents to their children.”⁵⁰ Cadigan sees libraries as ideal reconnection centers:

“Libraries change lives. Libraries can transform someone’s future. The library is the one government building that no one is afraid to go into, everyone is welcome.”⁵¹ Upon reentry, Cadigan notes: “Your first stop is to your family, your second stop is to your parole officer, and the third stop is the library.”⁵²

The results of the project, along with a toolkit for other public libraries, will be disseminated to the library field. The project aims to serve more than 1,400 returning individuals at community resource fairs over two years in the New Jersey area.⁵³ Such projects exemplify the ability of libraries to occupy an important space in the reentry process.

Economic Impacts on Families and Communities

Individuals who have experienced incarceration have far less economic mobility than individuals who have never been incarcerated. Formerly incarcerated persons make less per hour, work fewer weeks per year, and receive lower annual earnings than their non-incarcerated peers. This is due to a confluence of factors, including structural discrimination by employers, who reject job candidates on the basis of conviction status.

Children with fathers who have been incarcerated are significantly more likely than other children to be expelled or suspended from school (23% compared with 4%). Family income, when averaged over the years a father is incarcerated, is 22% lower than family income was the year before the father was incarcerated. Even in the year after the father’s release, family income remains 15% lower than it was the year prior to incarceration.⁵⁴

As a new generation of children are touched by the incarceration of a parent, and especially as those children feel the impact of that incarceration on their family’s income and in their school life, their prospects of upward economic mobility diminish. School librarians are in an excellent position to offer resources to children of incarcerated parents, help raise awareness of related issues amongst school staff, and advocate for approaches that support students experiencing this challenge.⁵⁵

Youth.gov promotes a trauma-based approach for school librarians working with students whose parents

are incarcerated. For example, Youth.gov asks that school librarians formulate answers to questions like: “knowing a student may have visited a parent at a facility over the weekend, how can you help manage his or her feelings and behaviors as he or she adjusts and transitions back into the school day?”⁵⁶ Supporting an incarcerated person’s loved ones is an important step towards ensuring that an individual feels supported upon reentry. Libraries can amend regular programming to address the specific needs of children and families affected by incarceration. Librarians can offer book clubs or readings that focus on the topic of incarceration. For children and teens, librarians can offer books geared toward children of the incarcerated; for adults, librarians can offer

memoirs written by people who have been incarcerated, as well as recent books on families and incarceration. Instead of a typical computer literacy class, libraries can offer computer and digital literacy courses geared towards families recovering from a loved one’s incarceration.

By focusing on families and enhancing existing support systems, libraries can leverage existing social infrastructure to support their patrons. While libraries often serve as classrooms and spaces for entertainment and exploration, at their heart, libraries are places for communities and families to connect with information and with one another.

IV. LIBRARIES AS SPACES OF POSSIBILITY

Libraries Advance Privacy and Confidentiality

According to the American Library Association’s (ALA) Library Bill of Rights, “All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.”

The deprivation of autonomy and privacy are fundamental features of incarceration. Due to the nature of prisons, individuals experiencing incarceration are almost continually in one another’s presence or in the presence of institutional authorities. Many citizens returning from prison choose not to disclose their conviction status. Patrons who have experienced incarceration deserve the privacy and autonomy that comes with non-disclosure policies when enjoying the benefits offered by their local library. There are numerous ways that libraries can provide relevant information to formerly incarcerated patrons without violating their right to privacy.

First, libraries can ensure that formerly incarcerated patrons are aware of the resources they offer by alerting them to these resources during their incarceration, which often means working directly with correctional facility staff and probation officers.

This is a key area where policy-makers should focus on working towards change. By urging correctional facilities, prosecutor’s offices, courthouses and other stakeholders in the criminal justice system to promote the resources that libraries have to offer, policy-makers can take a simple step towards reducing recidivism. Second, librarians can work to ensure that their standard practices do not pose barriers to entry for formerly incarcerated patrons. As stated earlier, common barriers include excessive fines and late fees, as well as the requirement that individuals hold proof of identity or residency to obtain a library card. Third, libraries can host sign-up events at halfway houses or other transitional spaces, and work to ensure that library hours and locations are accessible to formerly incarcerated patrons.

While requesting identifying data from patrons may help librarians tailor resources and programs, the act of requiring that data can serve as an additional barrier when it comes to a formerly incarcerated person feeling welcome in their library. In terms of library programming, formerly incarcerated persons often have similar needs as individuals experiencing homelessness, returning veterans, and new immigrants. Understanding that libraries do serve formerly incarcerated individuals, whether librarians know their conviction status or not, is the first step toward offering inclusive services.

Librarians as Career Advisors, and Libraries as Places for Economic Opportunity

For decades, the library has been a place for learning of all kinds—a place to try out new things and a place where people, regardless of social or economic status, expand their horizons.

While libraries cannot single-handedly reduce recidivism rates, they can play an important role in reintegrating formerly incarcerated patrons into the workforce. For individuals who have experienced incarceration, the transition process back into society can be overwhelming. Individuals often have a myriad of needs, and may be in a state of crisis in terms of figuring out how to meet them. Upon reentry, many need to find a source of income, and thus may need assistance with creating a resume, filling out job applications, succeeding at job interviews, and contacting agencies that can provide them with professional clothing for interviews and their future career.

Jason Dixon served seven years in Somerset State Correctional Institution, a medium security men's prison in Somerset, Pennsylvania. When Dixon was a child, he went to his local library frequently: "I grew up in a small town in Florida. Until my early teens, the library was my go-to place for information and books. . . . When I went



Jason Dixon, pictured here at Somerset State Correctional Institution.



Jason Dixon in 2014, after finishing his software engineering degree.

to prison, the library was immediately a comfortable place."⁵⁷

Dixon now works as a software engineer, but he wasn't always comfortable with technology: "I write software everyday now, which is interesting because eight years ago I didn't know how to drag and drop a file. I had a basic familiarity with computers before I went in, when I was incarcerated I didn't use the internet once. The only individuals who could were accessing the internet through contraband cell phones. . . . When I came home . . . My first foray was in the public library. I was living in a halfway house and I needed to enroll in community college and look for a job. The world moves on without you, and you wonder where your friends went and where your family is. News sites and social media sites were so foreign. I was nervous to ask librarians, I felt awkward asking questions of librarians since they use technology everyday."⁵⁸

Dixon observed that "There's a fear of technology when you've been in there for a long time. There are plenty of men who were there for a longer time than me, who are coming home to a world they don't even remotely understand." Dixon relates that going to a library after his release felt "strangely comforting." The library Dixon frequented post-release, the People's Library of New Kensington, Pennsylvania, had computer access, and Dixon found his first job on one of the library's computers "off of Craigslist."⁵⁹

Now, he spends a lot of time traveling and learning, continuing the process that all started at his local library. Regarding his career path, Dixon found himself immediately attracted to programming: "Within just a few weeks of learning how to program, I started

researching everything about the career path.”⁶⁰ Because of the technological resources required to learn how to program, he would not have been able to pursue this new career without what the People’s Library offered him.

Dixon believes that during incarceration, “the state shows you who is in control, and it’s hard to have initiative and be optimistic when you come out. While mine is maybe not a traditional story, there are a lot of jobs out there that people coming home may not believe are possible.” Having libraries present those possibilities to formerly incarcerated persons is vital for giving them these kinds of opportunities. In regards to his career, he noted that work has been his pathway out: “I saw working as my tool out of that life, out of that condition, and out of my past.”⁶¹

Numerous library systems are combating the issue of post-incarceration joblessness. The Seattle Public Library system offers free job search and career development programs at their Central Library and Rainier

Beach locations.⁶² The Seattle system also offers a class on how to apply for a job with a conviction history. When developing their own offerings, Washington State libraries looked at programs offered by other public library systems. In particular, they were inspired by Colorado State Library’s Free to Learn Project and Denver Public Library’s Resources for Ex-Offenders Project. In addition to ongoing employment-related programs, the San Francisco Public Library maintains a list of employment resources relevant to individuals in the reentry process.

Libraries are spaces for economic mobility, where online job posts are made available to patrons who may not otherwise have such access. Programs such as those noted above are examples of ways that existing library expertise and resources can be harnessed and tailored to fit the employment needs of formerly incarcerated persons, who face the challenge of finding career paths where they will not be shunned on the basis of their conviction status.

V. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRISON LIBRARIES

Forging Connections Between Prison Libraries and Public Libraries to Facilitate Successful Reentry

Many of the issues mentioned above, including a formerly incarcerated individual’s right to privacy, are compounded when there is a lack of communication between prison libraries and public libraries. To combat issues arising from this lack of communication, the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) has incorporated a program called Reference by Mail, where library students from San Jose State University answer the reference requests included in letters from currently incarcerated patrons. SFPL’s Reference by Mail program was developed through the model established by the NYPL’s long-running Reference by Mail program, which is administered through NYPL’s Correctional Services department.

SFPL is home to Jail and Reentry Services, a program led by two librarians that provides direct library service to people in the three San Francisco jails. Each patron is seen on a regular basis, with priority given to patrons who are located within medical pods, administrative

segregation, and psychiatric supervision areas. The program supervisor, Rachel Kinnon, has been the librarian at the San Francisco Juvenile Justice Center for over ten years.⁶³ Together with the supervisory staff at SFPL, she identified a need for library services for adults in the San Francisco County Jails and connected with the San



Francisco Sheriff's Department to discuss the possibility of providing such library services. Jeanie Austin was brought on to help develop the program, and together, the librarians explored library standards, reviewed literature on library services inside of jails and prisons, and established best practices.

The collection on each SFPL book cart includes representative materials for many different racial and cultural groups and LGBTQ individuals, as well as materials in a variety of languages, primarily Spanish and Chinese. New areas of collection development and materials are often identified through conversations with patrons inside San Francisco County Jails.

The Jail and Reentry Services librarians partner with the Prisoner Reentry Network, a network of people who were incarcerated for long periods of time, to identify resources useful to people in reentry after long-term incarceration.⁶⁴ Jail and Reentry Services librarians work with SFPL librarians to ensure that the Library has a presence at reentry-related events in the community, including health fairs at community centers and



A San Francisco Public Library book cart at a San Francisco jail.

restorative justice events. Individuals often form strong positive connotations with their prison library.⁶⁵ For an incarcerated person, the prison library offers a window to worlds unseen. Public libraries can take advantage of these prison library connections in order to begin laying a foundation for successful reentry.

VI. CONCLUSION

Libraries and librarians offer educational opportunities, technology access, guidance, and privacy and confidentiality to their patrons. As the original public universities, libraries operate as spaces of possibility and redemption for all members of the community, regardless of their conviction status. The ways that libraries will offer great social and economic returns for the formerly

incarcerated in the coming years is yet untold, but the potential is there. In today's fast-paced world, there are numerous opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to benefit from library programming, for libraries to grow and evolve, and for policy-makers to help support the work of libraries as they accommodate the needs of all patrons.

ACTION ITEMS FOR LIBRARIANS, FORMERLY INCARCERATED PATRONS, AND POLICY-MAKERS

How can librarians advocate for currently and formerly incarcerated patrons?

- Forge connections with prison libraries, correctional librarians, educational programs, and other local groups already providing information to people who are incarcerated
- Find inspiration from programs offered by other public libraries
- Host book drives for local jails and prisons
- Share materials with groups that send books to people who are incarcerated
- Arrange a Congressional visit to your library, and discuss the needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated library patrons with your representative(s)

- ❑ Form connections with individuals within the criminal justice system, including sheriff’s offices, public defenders and prosecutors, etc. in order to better incorporate library services in local prisons and jails
- ❑ Host video visitations at libraries for families separated by incarceration
- ❑ Join the ALA Interest Group for Incarcerated and Detained, a part of the Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services (ODLOS) at <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity>
- ❑ Host voter registration events in partnership with reentry services
- ❑ Catalog free and low cost services available to individuals navigating reentry (legal aid clinics, homeless shelters, health care, child and family counseling, etc.)
- ❑ Advertise your library’s ability to aid job seekers (access to computers, books, classes, etc.)
- ❑ Brainstorm how formerly incarcerated patrons can take advantage of your library’s resources

How can formerly incarcerated patrons take advantage of library resources?

- ❑ Find your library!
- ❑ Learn more about the books, programs, and more available at your local library
- ❑ Engage with librarians—they love to answer questions and share resources!


- ❑ Grow with your community through local community-based programs
- ❑ Spend time with your family at family-focused library programming
- ❑ Learn about technology, from using a smartphone or computer, to exploring coding or graphic design
- ❑ Make use of technological resources at the library when it comes to finding employment, housing, and more
- ❑ Center libraries as a means to achieve your educational and professional goals
- ❑ Learn more about the world with library passes to events and museums

How can policy-makers better support libraries in serving currently and formerly incarcerated patrons?

- ❑ Fund correctional libraries and public libraries that support formerly incarcerated patrons
- ❑ End arbitrary book bans on books donated to jails and prisons
- ❑ Undertake studies on the costs of recidivism and the role of libraries in reducing its prevalence
- ❑ Fund crisis intervention services undertaken by social workers
- ❑ Write letters in support of libraries seeking grant funding
- ❑ Visit libraries and see their work in action

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