



Evidence Summary

There is a Lack of Standardization in the Collection Development and Circulation Policies of Prison Library Services

A Review of:

Conrad, S. (2012). Collection development and circulation policies in prison libraries: An exploratory survey of librarians in US correctional institutions. *The Library Quarterly*, 82(4), 407-427. doi: 10.1086/667435

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Abstract

Objective – To explore how collection development policies currently support the role and purpose of prison libraries, and to explore if the accessibility of circulation records impacts on patron privacy.

Design – Online survey questionnaire and a case study analysis of the existing policy statements of selected correctional institutions.

Setting – The prison library sector in the United States.

Subjects – 17 librarians and library staff across ten states in the United States.

Methods – An eight-question online questionnaire was used to explore the existing collection development and circulation policies in prison libraries, and the level of adherence to the guidelines of the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) and the American Correctional Association (ACA). In addition, participants were encouraged to forward any circulation or collection development policy statements for more detailed analysis. Each policy was then reviewed to assess the degree of alignment or otherwise with the American Library Association's (ALA) Prisoners' Right to Read guidelines (2010).

Main Results – The results of the survey found that 24% of libraries had no formal collection

development policy, and at least 53% of libraries had no circulation policy statement. In these instances, the libraries were typically subject to the local policies and procedures of the correctional institution. The purpose of the library and its collection was primarily viewed as: providing recreational reading material; maintaining contact with the outside world and enabling re-entry into the community; and supporting vocational skills and lifelong learning. In selecting materials, the results indicated that a broadly similar approach to that of public libraries was adopted by most institutions, with the exception of any material that may pose a safety or security threat to the institution. In one institution the use of library services or resources for legal purposes or to provide legal assistance was also clearly prohibited in the collection development policy, although approximately half of the libraries did state that providing legal material was one of their roles. The lengthy and arduous approval process for ordering books and other materials (up to ten months in one instance) was reported by several participants due to the layers of bureaucracy and controls inherent in the prison setting. With regard to circulation records and confidentiality issues, 35% of libraries deleted such records instantly upon return of the items, compared with 30% that archived them. A further 29% only retained information from the current and most recent patrons for the purposes of assessing and charging for damaged items.

Conclusion – The author found the prison library sector to be a relatively challenging environment. In this context, following the existing guidelines and best practice as recommended by the ALA and others, and establishing clear and ethical policy statements can help libraries to support the needs and rights of patrons more effectively.

Commentary

The author addresses a sector that has received comparatively little attention in the library and information practice literature to date. The study is framed in the context of recent legal and media controversy which has drawn

(unproven) parallels between a prisoner's access to reading material and the subsequent crimes that may be committed. The latter is obviously a broad and important social issue, not just of relevance within the library and information research community.

The detailed discussion in the literature review highlights some important issues in the sector, in particular the unique ethical dilemmas and challenges faced by prison librarians. Indeed it is difficult for policy statements to fully capture the delicate and nuanced balance that must be struck between protecting the institution and upholding prisoners' rights to access material. Moreover, librarians also have to contend with the perceptions of the institutional administration (and even the public), who may see providing full access to library services for prisoners, including recreational reading material, as being in conflict with the intrinsic concept of punishment. These predicaments may help to explain some of the inconsistencies in collection development and circulation policies across institutions that the survey results illuminate.

However, the small sample size in the study does undermine the validity of the results and the ability to make subsequent inferences to the broader population. While this is a problem that is openly acknowledged by the author, there are other methodological concerns that are not identified; for instance, no information is provided as to whether the survey was piloted in advance of its distribution. The fact that participants were required to enter their name and institution may have discouraged some individuals from completing the survey, and introducing anonymity may have helped to generate a larger sample. Furthermore, as 6 of the 17 institutions are based in Colorado this may introduce some degree of bias into the results. Although the author does find evidence of intrastate inconsistencies, indicative that policies tend to be determined at the institutional rather than the state level, this fact does not altogether eliminate this concern (Boyton & Greenhalgh, 2004).

While reference is made to relevant ALA policies, and the recommendations of the ASCLA and ACA, the questionnaire does not appear to survey library staff directly on their awareness or use of such tools (or at least this information is not presented in the article). This may have been a useful addition in order to explicitly assess the level of consciousness and penetration of the existing guidelines. The author also states that these guidelines are at least two decades old, however does not comment as to whether there is a need for an updated approach to reflect present realities, and perhaps this was a question worthy of inclusion. In this context, benchmarking current policies against what may be out-dated standards arguably weakens the potential importance and value of the results.

In terms of how the data are presented by the researcher, the figures included are somewhat confusing as the axes are generally unlabelled. It is probable that the y-axis in Figures 1 and 2 refers to the number rather than the percentage of institutions, however this is not specified, and indeed in Figure 3 percentages are used which reduces clarity even further.

The study adopts a narrow focus, but will certainly be of relevance to those working in

the prison library sector by prompting them to examine their current collection development and confidentiality policies. It also raises issues of interest to a broader audience (particularly given the generally acknowledged similarities with the public library sector), namely the accessibility of circulation records and the potential censorship of library materials and policies by internal or external stakeholders. How libraries can resist such influences, and uphold best practice guidelines, is an important consideration for us all.

References

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