



THE ROLE OF PRISON LIBRARY AND READING IN THE LIVES OF INMATES. READING AS A MEANS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND INFORMAL LEARNING

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Abstract

The aim of our study is to examine the importance of reading, the functions and organisational methods of prison libraries, including the role of the prison librarian, and the challenges and problems that arise. To answer our research questions, we reviewed key international research and literature. In many ways, prison libraries offer inmates an escape from the realities of everyday life, opening a window to the world beyond prison walls. Prison library allows prisoners to participate in cultural activities, to spend time in a safe and friendly environment, to borrow books, to read and plays an important role in building relationships. Books can be an opportunity to reflect on the future, the past and the present. Literacy is much more than just a pastime. In prison, reading can become a survival strategy. It's how people take care of their minds and souls. At the same time, the complexity of the situation creates many difficulties in running a prison library. Many prison conditions are less conducive to the organisation of library services, such as security and censorship. In addition, educational and cultural programmes are often seen as a luxury by the public, as prisoners do not deserve these benefits. However, the importance of this issue cannot be overlooked, as visits to prison libraries can have a positive impact on the mental health of prisoners, which is essential for them to become useful members of society after their release.

Keywords: prison library; reintegration; benefits; psychological impacts; mental health

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Introduction

Prison libraries open a window to the world beyond the prison walls by allowing prisoners to pursue their own leisure or educational reading interests, borrow books, participate in cultural activities, or simply spend time in a safe and friendly environment. These activities can help prisoners forget the realities of prison life for a while, become more cultured, and gain access to information.

Good prison libraries should have a stock that supports prisoners' diverse reading, orientation, and leisure needs (Krolak, 2019). The incarcerated person also has the right to access learning and information. Still, it is legitimate for the prison library stock to be different from the public library stock for security reasons. Still, restrictions on access to materials should be imposed when there is a threat to prison security (Lehman & Locke, 2005).

In our study, we will examine the role, functions, and ways of organising prison libraries, along with the following research questions: Why is the library important in prison? What is the role of the prison library regarding the inmates' mental well-being and learning? Why is it important to have a good prison librarian? What challenges and problems can arise in running a prison library?

Many difficulties arise in running a prison library because of the situation's complexity. In prisons, there are many less than supportive circumstances in the organisation of library services, for example, the tension between security and the various out-of-cell programmes is a fundamental problem (Shaw & Humber, 2007). Moreover, the public often sees educational, training, cultural and correctional programmes as a luxury, as prisoners do not deserve such benefits (Carter & Russell, 2005). However, research has shown that participation in prison programmes can have several positive effects, such as helping to make the prison as an institution function better (Johnson, 2008) and having a positive impact on the mental and physical health of prisoners (Nelson, Specian, & Tracy, 2006).

The importance of prison libraries

In addition to exploring the history of prison libraries through the work of Rubin (1973, 1974; Rubin & Souza, 1989), several researchers have explored in detail the theoretical underpinnings of prison library services (Clark & McCreagh, 2006; Billington, 2011; Garner, 2017). Prison libraries fulfil a wide range of roles, including not only lending reading materials but also acting as learning centres, supporting formal education (*e.g.*, by providing information on educational opportunities), leisure activities (*e.g.*, Rubin, 1997) Due to personnel,

financial and space constraints, no prison library can fulfil all these functions. Many factors influence the decision on which role to focus on, including *‘the size and security level of the institution, the type of access to library services (restricted or free movement within the institution), the demographic composition of the prison population, the length of sentences, and the range and nature of other activities such as treatment and education programmes, social services and employment opportunities for prisoners’* (Lehmann 2000, p. 3).

Already in her early work, Rubin (1973, p. 3) drew attention to the fact that *‘despite the fact that illiteracy among inmates is currently three times greater than among the general population, inmates read five times as many books as members of the public’*. If the library has an up-to-date and balanced collection, indicators such as items per capita and collection circulation rate (average number of copies per year) can be ten to fifteen times higher than in a comparable public library. The reason for the discrepancy is partly that prisoners are deprived of their liberty, which gives them more time to read (Lehmann, 2000). It is clear from the above that prisoners use libraries intensively and that these institutions are necessary, and their existence cannot be questioned.

There is considerable variation in the design of prison libraries worldwide, because each prison library is unique and adapted to the specificities and possibilities of the prison. We can talk about a prison library broadly, ranging from a branch library of a public library to a cabinet with a few second-hand books. We can find spaces modelled on outside libraries, welcoming and tempting, with well-chosen library collections that provide both meeting and community spaces. But there are also run-down, out-of-date libraries with boring old, pointless books and resources.

Prison libraries make prisoners' sentences more bearable, to support them in fulfilling their information, cultural and learning needs, and to facilitate their reintegration into society after their release. Rubin (1973) argues that the reason for providing library services to inmates does not have to be examined in relation to the legal requirement to provide prison libraries but should focus on their role in rehabilitation and reintegration. As Coons puts it, *‘Books can save you. That is the point’* (Coons, 1972, p. 46).

The necessity and psychological role of reading in prison

Several papers have explored the role of reading in prison, investigating the psychological impact of both individual reading and participation in reading

groups (Billington, 2011; Duncan et al., 2024). Reading is known to have many positive effects, but these effects are even more needed for prisoners living in isolated, stressful, and unstimulating environments.

Qualitative research has shown that the calming nature of reading behind bars helps to reduce stress levels and distracts individuals from the anxiety and problems of everyday life (National Literacy Trust, 2016). Turning pages has been shown to improve well-being and help prisoners cope with stressful situations (Finlay & Bates, 2018). Prisoners can spend their leisure time reading in constructive ways and develop their critical thinking and creativity (Hafner, 1970). Immersion in a story can lead to enjoyment and increased understanding (Boucher et al., 2024; Finlay & Bates, 2018).

Literacy also offers a choice, the range of which is severely limited in prison life. When a prisoner decides what book to read next, putting his name on a library waiting list, even if it seems like a small thing, offers a choice, a way for the prisoner to feel human (Carpenter, 2024). Jeanie Austin, a prison librarian in the San Francisco Public Library highlighted: *‘Reading becomes a survival strategy for people inside, emotionally and mentally, but it’s also a way of thinking through a future, thinking through a past, thinking through a present, or in some cases, thinking through their own freedom’* (Carpenter, 2024).

The experience of reading boosts self-esteem and self-confidence because it helps the reader to become more informed and confident, especially for prisoners in a stimulus-poor environment (Finlay & Bates, 2018). Leonel Cerda was sentenced to fifteen years in a New York State prison. After his release, he was shocked to see no phone booths in the streets. He thought that he would find a phone booth when he got out, throw a few coins in the slot, and ring a family member. (Carpenter, 2024) *‘Reading gives you up-to-date information. If I’d had information, I would’ve known when I got out we didn’t have pay phones.’* (Carpenter, 2024)

Sometimes, prisoners attempt to reconnect with their life before prison through books. They re-read their childhood and youth favourites because the experience brings back memories of that time. In her article, Carpenter (2024) mentions a case where a prisoner asked for copies of a fishing magazine to recall his former favourite pastime in his prison cell.

Reading can have many positive psychological effects, diverting attention from the everyday problems of the prison environment. In the following chapter, we will discuss in detail how prison library visits and reading impact

prisoners, how the prison library is a refuge, and how it contributes to developing prisoners' skills and abilities, among other things.

The role of reading and prison libraries in the lives of prisoners: a tool for mental well-being

Prison libraries are characterised in the studies as educational, informational and leisure centres in which a variety of actions are carried out, from lending materials to providing a calm and peaceful environment (Clark & McCreaigh, 2006; Billington, 2011; Garner, 2017). Prison libraries are recognised as sanctuaries where literature helps inmates break away from everyday boredom and concerns, reduces strain and levels of anxiety, and overall helps to sustain their mental wellbeing and feeling of liberty in a tightly regulated correctional setting (Clark & McCreaigh, 2006; Billington, 2011; Garner, 2017; Tanacković et al., 2021).

The library as a refuge, a means of well-being

Prison libraries provide a comfortable and relaxing environment for prisoners and protect their mental health. When people enter prison, they are often confronted with several challenging situations that can hurt their psychological well-being (Sullivan, 2008). Psychological difficulties, *e.g.*, depression and difficulties in adjusting to the prison environment, can be caused by several factors, such as a confined living space, lack of privacy, and increased vulnerability to victimisation (Reingle Gonzalez & Connell, 2014). Incarceration eradicates positive social bonds and relationships and often creates new negative associations, in addition to removing a person's autonomy and can solidify the offender's identity (McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Liebling, 2012). To mitigate these adverse effects, the literature reports many positive effects of prison library use.

Prison libraries offer an escape from stressors by giving prisoners a place where they can find comfort, productively spend their free time and take care of their mental health (Han, 2023). According to Sullivan, inmates see reading in the prison library as a means of saving their souls (Sullivan, 2008). Time spent in the prison library reduces stress levels, improves their well-being, and helps them cope with adverse situations (Liebling, 2012).

The terms 'normality' and 'normalisation' appear repeatedly in the prison library literature (Vogel, 2009; Lehmann, 2011; Dilek-Kayaoglu & Demir, 2014), since the library is frequently the only space in the institute that provides

a public service and is a reminder of the outside world in the unsettling, tension-filled prison setting.

In addition to merely offering a shelter for prisoners, the library can help to create an atmosphere based on respect and understanding for each other (Finlay & Bates, 2018; Vogel, 2009), which has been described as an 'oasis of equality and respect', a peaceful place in a normally unfriendly setting that frequently degrades and even dehumanises individuals (Vogel, 2009, p. 20). One inmate in Stevens's doctoral research noted that "you get a little more respect in the library" (Stevens, 1995, p. 160). In their study of the adverse effects of incarceration, Hulley and colleagues found that such a space can be of enormous importance to the well-being of prisoners and being important for it (Hulley et al., 2012).

Liebling (2011), in her study on the moral quality of incarcerated life, concludes that the important differences between prisons are in the areas of interpersonal relationships, treatment, and the use and abuse of power. Liebling points out how different levels of '*respect, fairness and humanity*' can affect the experiences of prisoners (Liebling, 2011, p. 533). A library space where individuality and diversity are acknowledged alongside mutual respect can be a model of what is achievable in a correctional institution, and, in addition, can positively impact the broader prison culture. In addition to creative and enjoyable activities, library visits are a practical, constructive use of time spent in prison (Finlay & Bates, 2018). Qualitative research has also highlighted the relaxing, calming, wellbeing-promoting nature of reading and shows that reading is an activity that can alleviate stress by helping to distract from current circumstances (Schroeder & Hollister, 2014). Clark also stresses that goal-oriented behaviour is crucial for well-being in detention and that reading for enjoyment is a form of so-called purposeful activity, thus contributing to a sense of well-being (Clark, 2016).

In addition to leisure reading, a well-resourced prison library also offers a range of sources that has a specific focus on books on health, mental health and general wellbeing (Finlay & Bates, 2018). One specifically effective programme has been launched in UK public libraries is the Reading Well: Books on Prescription programme, which has now been rolled out in UK prison libraries (Society of Chief Librarians, 2015). It is a health professional-led initiative to help individuals '*manage their mental health and wellbeing by providing access to appropriate self-help reading*' (Society of Chief Librarians, 2015, p. 3). The

books are suggested to readers by health professionals or simply on the bookshelves for anyone to borrow.

Krolak (2019) emphasises that time spent in the prison library not only allows prisoners to experience the pleasure of reading for pleasure but also supports their reading, even for learning purposes, and may even motivate prisoners to start or continue their studies.

The library as a place for informal learning and skills development

Prison libraries play a key role in providing educational opportunities, enabling them to develop their reading skills and participate in reading and cultural activities. Literacy and reading are skills that are essential for the overall development of the individual (Han, 2023). Their absence in prison can lead to isolation and helplessness for prisoners, creating negative feelings, for example, if they are unable to understand letters from family members or acquire the skills needed to work in prison (Han, 2023).

The role of prison libraries is complex; in addition to developing reading skills, they provide opportunities for individuals to satisfy personal and cultural interests (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). Prison libraries are also spaces for lifelong learning. Inmates who regularly visit the prison library are more likely to be interested in other prison programmes or activities, for example, participating in literacy programmes (Finlay & Bates, 2018).

Researchers on the subject (Irwin, 2003, 2008; Farley & Pike, 2016; McNeill, 2014) point out that inmates are frequently reluctant to participate in formal education programmes because of the many difficulties, problems, and failures they have faced during their years in the education system, and the negative experiences they have had with learning prior to incarceration. Irwin (2008) is directly critical of the frequently inadequate teaching methods provided in correctional settings, as they reproduce adverse learning episodes so profoundly integrated in the prisoners' identities. McNeill (2014) explains in detail why providing access to informal learning opportunities in prison is so crucial. He stresses that the penal justice system has long considered education as a purely rehabilitative tool or a mechanism to decrease recidivism (McNeill, 2014). However, this approach is often somewhat counterproductive, with prisoners often viewing education as yet another reform method imposed on them, and this perception can reinforce the already adverse image of education held by many prisoners. More informal, flexible learning allows prisoners to diminish these negative experiences, as it is driven by the individual's learning

needs and desires rather than by the authorities or the school system (McNeill, 2014).

In his research on the motivations of prisoner participation, Behan comes to a similar conclusion when he states that correctional institutes should offer spaces that allow individuals to ‘*voluntarily engage in different types of learning at their own pace, at a time of their choosing*’ (Behan, 2014, p. 20). Reading in the library can help prisoners develop a commitment to lifelong learning (Brosens et al., 2015). The significance of informal and lifelong learning cannot be overstated, as numerous competencies and dispositions essential for informed citizenship - such as critical thinking, self-confidence, and self-esteem - are frequently fostered through self-directed learning experiences. Education is, therefore, a means of acquiring knowledge and promoting the development of ‘*competent and humane citizens who are proactive participants in social life*’ (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), which is key to reintegration into society.

In the next section, we will look at the models of prison library management and the main library types around the world, with some specific examples to illustrate the different types of organisations.

Models for the operation of prison libraries

There are several organisational options for running prison libraries around the world, with considerable variation between countries. Many aspects can be considered when making comparisons, such as the institutional set-up of prison libraries, the staff, the specificities of the library collection and the range of services provided. The various experiences from several countries demonstrate the diversity of practices, however, these are only ‘snapshots’ and cannot be considered as a general, overall summary; our aim is only to highlight and describe the main types based on different institutional structures and partnerships with public libraries.

Institutional framework and structure refer to the organizational structure and institutional placement in which the prison library works. These circumstances affect the general situation of the prison library, as well as its financing and staffing. Certain prison libraries are situated close to or within the education department of the prison, some prison libraries are part of the psychosocial treatment department, and there are also independent prison libraries. A further significant distinction is the different level of cooperation with various external organizations, namely public libraries. This covers a broad

spectrum; we find prisons where library services to prisons are provided entirely by public libraries, so the full range of services is provided in this way. In other prisons, sporadic cooperation or inter-library loan services supplement the library services. There are also institutions where cooperation and organized information exchange take place in prison library staff training. In this subsection, different models of cooperation with public libraries are presented.

The first model is the import model, in which the prison library can be considered a branch of the local public library, and the imported services are delivered by the authorities responsible for providing services in the outside community, public bodies, and the prison library. This model is typically observed in Norway, where prison libraries are integrated into the national library network and function as branch libraries of local public libraries (Krolak, 2019). In this country, everyone is entitled by law to have access to library services, which also applies to prisoners. The government funds the services through contracts between the National Library of Norway and the municipalities responsible for providing the services (Krolak, 2019). Liabilities are divided between the library and the prison library based on an agreement between the two parties. Each prison library is managed by professional librarians and their wages, and the prison library book stock are funded by the Norwegian National Library (Bolt & Ra, 2018; Langelid, 2009).

In the second model, the prison library is not a branch of the local public library but works in partnership with the local public library. The United Kingdom is a remarkable model for this type of arrangement. This model was prompted by the funding difficulties that arose after the Second World War (Krolak, 2019). Financial constraints and relatively high costs made it difficult to acquire new volumes, and active partnerships with public libraries became necessary. Consequently, the prison authorities paid a fee to the public libraries, and in return, the libraries were required to supply the prisons with sufficient books (Sutter, 2015). Following years of practice, this became the standard model for the operation of libraries and can be considered the second basic type (Krolak, 2019).

In the third model, the prison library has limited cooperation with the local public library. This is a widespread approach with a variety of solutions. In South Africa, for example, sporadic collaboration between prison and public libraries is not a systematic and maintainable model and only works in a few locations in some conditions (Krolak, 2019). Other countries have documented

fragmented collaborative initiatives with public libraries. In Colombia, the Bogotá District Public Library Network (BiblioRed) provides prisons with a part of their collection through an interlibrary loan initiative called the “Travelling Suitcase” programme, whereby a ‘changing collection of books is delivered in a suitcase’ (Krolak, 2019, p. 24). A 2013 survey in Croatia showed that 11 out of 23 prisons had occasional contact with the local public library, mainly when the latter sent materials to the prison that were no longer available for loan; the library book van regularly visited another prison library; and five reported no cooperation between the prison library and the public library (Krolak, 2019; Šimunic et al., 2016). The other prison libraries participate in an interlibrary loan programme with local public libraries (Šimunic et al., 2016).

In the fourth model, there is no cooperation between the prison and public libraries. Prison libraries would always depend on the attitude of the prison management to their operation, a statement that is even more true for this model, as prison libraries do not operate as part of a network but in a separate way, very frequently relying on external organizations, and thus need the support of NGOs, religious organizations, and donors. In India, the status of prison libraries essentially reflects how prison authorities view the concept of libraries and literacy and their function in prisons. For example, there is no formal cooperation with public libraries in Nigeria or Ghana (Mfum, 2012), the Kuwaiti prison library has not reported any cooperation, and the prison library's collection depends on donations, resulting in the library's collection being considered outdated. A common feature in these countries is the lack of resources, partly due to the absence of legal regulations or policies requiring the establishment of prison libraries (Krolak, 2019).

The fifth model is the mobile library services solution. A mobile library, rather than a fixed location, can be a convenient and affordable option in places where there is no home library. In Nicaragua, for instance, the Bertolt Brecht Library regularly travels to various villages, rural schools, factories and facilities, including many prisons. Its services are funded by a German NGO (Hanemann & Krolak, 2017). The Ljubljana Mobile Library is a separate branch of the Ljubljana City Library in Slovenia. This traveling selection of books has been touring the country since 1974, with forty-seven different stops and a focus on special groups who cannot visit the library due to physical limitations, for example, because they are serving a prison sentence. A partnership has been established with Correctional Facility Ig (CFI) prison to reach this target group.

With no membership fee, prisoners are exempt from late fees, fines, and extended loan periods of 75 days (Krolak, 2019).

After presenting the organisational models of prison libraries, the next chapter will examine why the commitment of the prison librarian is crucial to the provision of professional library services.

The prison librarian as a key person: the importance of the personality

The prison librarian's role goes beyond simple organisational tasks and collection supervision, playing a key role in ensuring the success of this special type of library. Commonly, the librarian is the only professional on staff, and all support staff are drawn from the prison population, so the librarian manages all aspects of the library's operations (Lehmann, 2000). The job of prison librarians is different from that of librarians in public libraries in several ways. Prison librarians must work with limited resources, which are restricted by security precautions and increased use of space. In addition, it is essential that prison librarians achieve a balance between the needs of management, security considerations and the needs of prisoners. The key to effectiveness is to *'develop an open but professional and trusting relationship with the prisoners visiting the library to become a space that facilitates the prisoners' comfort in expressing their needs'* (Krolak, 2019, p. 26).

It would be beneficial if library staff received some training on providing library services. In addition to the required academic qualifications, it is vital that the prison librarian should be able to carry out their duties effectively in a prison environment. Ideally the prison librarian has additional background or expertise in fields such as psychology, criminology, education, and social work (Krolak, 2019). Prison librarians should ideally have a few years of professional experience in a library environment outside the correctional system. This is preferable considering their isolation, as prison librarians are often isolated from other prison librarian colleagues and unable to participate in professional associations that provide support (Krolak, 2019).

Looking at the personality traits of library professionals, there are several essential qualities, such as resilience, emotional intelligence, assertiveness, strong stress tolerance, and patience. In their work, prison librarians must interact with a very heterogeneous group of prisoners with different cultural backgrounds, personal situations, skills, and knowledge levels. Because of its unique circumstances, the prison library can only fulfil its function if the

prisoners it is meant to serve thrive and feel well in it. Regardless of why prisoners are in prison, all should be seen as readers simply looking for literature to read (Krolak, 2019).

The prison librarian must not behave in a biased manner; it is crucial that all readers should be treated with equal professional respect. The librarian's ability to respond to the demands of prisoner readers is key to the library's affirmative role in the everyday lives of prisoners (Lehmann, 2000). Managing a thriving prison library requires a high level of resilience by the prison librarian. However, it is also important that the job is one that gives the librarian satisfaction. For instance, one prison librarian in the United States finds her job as the most difficult, rewarding, sad, happy, *'challenging, eye-opening, frustrating, and interesting librarian position'* (Andrew, 2017). Prison librarians may be the most memorable prison staff members from their time in prison. This is evident from the positive feedback given by a prison librarian in Sweden who recalled being told by prisoners that *'you are the most important person in this prison'* and *'you are one of the few positive things I have experienced during my time in prison at Skänningeanstalten'* (Krolak, 2019, p. 28). Libraries offer space, opportunity and time for prisoners to immerse themselves in a piece of literature, an escape from reality. Thanks to the work of librarians, the love of reading can be instilled in prisoners and become a habit (Krolak, 2019).

However crucial the role of the librarian in running the prison library and supporting the reading culture of prisoners, there is no escaping the challenges that librarians, staff, and prisoners face every day in this environment due to the specificity of the place.

Challenges and difficulties in the operation of prison libraries

The specific nature of the prison library stems from the fact that it does not operate in isolation but performs its tasks within the prison environment. The prison's own mission and safety guidelines are often at odds with the library profession's code of ethics, code of conduct and conviction in the freedom of access to information (Lehmann, 2000). The conditions of the correctional setting are unconventional, with emphases that pose challenges to the work and philosophy of the 'traditional' librarian.

There are several difficulties with the operation of prison libraries. Unfortunately, not all prison libraries provide a high-quality service due to many factors, such as inadequate funding or lack of qualified staff. Inadequate funding

and cooperation with public libraries may be the reason if the collection is outdated and thus does not meet the reading interests of prisoners (Bajić, 2015; Canning & Buchanan, 2021; Eze, 2015; Tanacković et al., 2021).

The collection should be diverse and varied, with books reflecting the multidimensional needs of detainees in line with their different reading abilities. As many prisoners in most countries in the world are not educated or have low literacy skills (Campbell, 2006), they should be the focus of prison library management, but this is often not the case (Šimunić et al., 2014; Folorunso & Folorunso, 2019). Ings and Joslin (2011) state as a problem that the role of prison libraries in the rehabilitation and reintegration process should not be overlooked, but unfortunately, this is often the case. Folorunso and Folorunso (2019) criticise that the importance of the prison library is mainly only manifested in the fact that it supports the reading experiences of prisoners, especially reading for pleasure or recreation, and does not focus on promoting rehabilitation.

The use of today's digital and technological devices in prisons raises several questions, particularly about security and cost considerations (Krolak, 2019). The risk of misuse, communication with the outside world, and manipulation of devices are safety threats. Resource constraints and cost considerations can cause problems in two areas: the high cost of hardware and software on the one hand and the technical and financial constraints on the other.

In prisons, all organisational policies - not just digital tools - are heavily influenced by security considerations, and censorship is an important aspect in collection management and expansion (Krolak, 2019). The purpose of censorship is usually to avoid escapes, riots, violence and illegal trafficking in prison. The prison library is an integral component of the prison service and is thus subject to security standards and regulations in two respects. First, care should be taken to ensure that the physical facility, the library premises and the materials on loan are not used for illegal purposes, such as the transmission of illicit messages or the smuggling of drugs. Secondly, censorship is also implemented through the withholding of books if their content is found to be against public order or, for example, pornographic or violent (Krolak, 2019). Censorship is a key theme in US prison libraries, where prison librarians must find a healthy balance between growing and maintaining their collections (Garner, 2017; Harvey, 2019). Censorship is a tough reality for prison librarians and controversial for the librarianship profession, but the security aspect is paramount in prison (Krolak, 2019). Consequently, some prisoners' rights may

be compromised; for example, they may not have access to all the reading material they would like (Andrew, 2017). Censorship should only be introduced if it is indispensable and does not hinder access to literature and the educational development of prisoners.

There is a very complex set of problems that prison library management and staff must face in managing prison libraries, and they must respond to the new challenges that arise in dealing with these situations and problems.

Conclusion

Prison libraries are recognised worldwide as important actors and catalysts for the development of prisoners. They provide access to books and other resources and educational opportunities in the prison environment, enabling prisoners to improve their literacy skills and expand their knowledge (Han, 2023). They contribute to prisoners' psychological and mental well-being by providing a relaxed environment. Prisoners are provided with access to high-quality recreational time and to a range of information, cultural and educational opportunities (Bandaranayake, 2021; Lehmann & Locke, 2005), which is regarded a fundamental human right (Council of Europe, 2006; United Nations, 2015). The opportunity to access to reading and library services is essential in prisons, given the limited mobility of people in these institutions and the generally excessive amount of free time they have.

In Gulker's view, a sound prison library can '*humanize the environment*' and '*transform an incredibly sterile atmosphere into a productive area for learning*' (Gulker, 1973, p. 55). As education becomes more prevalent behind bars, prisoners' need for access to academic information and an environment supportive to this type of learning increases, and so does the role of prison libraries. In more recent research, in the literature after the 2000s, experts emphasise not only the function of the prison library in facilitating educational processes and developing the skills and abilities of prisoners but also its role in building social relations and promoting mutual understanding. (Finlay & Bates, 2018; Maruna & LeBel, 2012; McNeill, 2009). We share Krolak's (2019) view that different ways of organising prison libraries mainly reflect traditions and local contexts (*e.g.*, organizational, institutional, funding, professional background and security). Different models of library services are related to each other, these models have in common the aim of creating a space for learning and

socialisation, but there are significant differences in how they are implemented and realised. A properly functioning prison library can be a cost-effective way of sharing valuable resources, and creating a space for learning and socialisation can help make prison life more bearable for prisoners. However, it also has far-reaching and lasting effects beyond this. Since prison libraries help to develop prisoners' skills, including information literacy, which contribute to their employability after release, thereby reducing the likelihood of imprisonment, their social utility is questionable (Han, 2023).

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