

Global perspectives on prison libraries / Globalne perspektive zatvorskih knjižnica

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Abstract

Prisoners have a fundamental right to access information, reading materials, and learning opportunities during their time of incarceration, as outlined in the *Nelson Mandela Rules* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015). This is particularly important as prisoners often come from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This paper shows that prison libraries play an important role in providing this access and in supporting the societal mandate of prisons to rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners. Based on global experiences, ideas are shared that might be of interest in strengthening prison libraries in Croatia.

Keywords: access to information, literacy, prison education, prison libraries

Sažetak

Kako se navodi u Mandelinim pravilima (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015), zatvorenici imaju temeljno pravo na pristup informacijama, materijalima za čitanje i mogućnostima za učenje tijekom izdržavanja svojih zatvorskih kazni. Ovo je od posebne važnosti s obzirom na to da zatvorenici često dolaze iz nižeg socioekonomskog i obrazovnog okruženja. U ovom se radu ističe da zatvorske knjižnice imaju važnu ulogu u pružanju spomenutog pristupa i ispunjavanju društvene odgovornosti zatvora za rehabilitaciju i reintegraciju zatvorenika. Predstavljene su ideje, temeljene na svjetskim iskustvima, koje bi mogle biti od interesa za osnaživanje zatvorskih knjižnica u Hrvatskoj.

Ključne riječi: obrazovanje u zatvoru, pismenost, pristup informacijama, zatvorske knjižnice

1. Introduction

Currently, around 11 million people are incarcerated globally, and this number continues to rise. Overcrowding and other challenges in prisons has pushed many systems worldwide to a breaking point, leaving them unable to deliver services like education in line with international standards. However, education is a fundamental human right and should not be denied to prisoners (Education in prison, 2021: 9).

Prison libraries function as safe, peaceful, and welcoming spaces for social interaction, encouraging education, lifelong learning, access to information, publication borrowing, and cultural or spiritual engagement. In addition, they foster literacy and language skills, give access to diverse learning opportunities, and support social cohesion. Around the globe, books and prison libraries give inmates valuable opportunities for recreation, education, and personal development.

The right to education, including to prison library services is highlighted in various international documents, such as the *Nelson Mandela Rules* (UNODC, 2015), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) publication *Books Beyond Bars* (Krolak, 2019) and the recently published *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* (Garner and Krolak, 2023).

Prison populations often include a disproportionate number of persons from poor, discriminated against, and marginalized groups and communities. They are much more likely to have had limited or no educational experience, and to suffer from difficulties with reading and writing than the rest of society. They also often include people from different ethnic and language backgrounds.

The IFLA Guidelines (Garner and Krolak, 2023) state that all prisoners should have regular access to a library, ideally at least once every two weeks, either to spend time there or borrow materials. They need to be made aware of the library, for example during their induction to the prison, and encouraged to use it. Ideally, prison libraries are managed by qualified prison library staff with access to sufficient budget and resources. If a prison library lacks a professional librarian, there can be a professionally managed regional unit or a professional librarian coordinating several prison libraries. Regional prison library staff should actively network, participate in professional development, and convene at least once a year.

2. Cooperation with (public) libraries and library training institutions

Prisoners have the same right to quality library services as every other person in a community. The *IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* (2022) explicitly states that public libraries also need to serve people in prison. Therefore, public libraries should reach out to prison libraries in their community to offer their services and assistance and to explore opportunities for cooperation.

For prison libraries it has many benefits to cooperate with local (public) library services, as this ensures modern and professional library standards, provides the opportunity

to receive initial and ongoing training for prison library staff, enables the sharing of knowledge and materials, provides the possibility of access to the holdings of the public library via inter-library loan, and facilitates common cultural activities that serve as a bridge between both worlds. The ideal situation is given when the prison library serves as a branch library of the local (public) library network, providing the same standards and services as every branch library.

There are many examples around the world highlighting a successful cooperation with local (prison) libraries, such as mobile libraries stopping at the prison; public libraries regularly sharing boxes of new materials with the prison in their community; prisoners receiving a free library card for their public library close to their release; common activities of prison and public libraries, such as author visits or reading and discussing the same book inside and outside of prison; or donating slightly outdated newspapers and news magazines to the prison.

Library training institutions can also play a key role in modernizing the national prison library system. Students and staff can do research, document and share experiences, conduct surveys to get a realistic picture of the current situation and to explore possible needs, or they can implement literacy or other cultural activities.

3. Collections

Prison library collections should cater to all user groups within the facility, offering both books and audio-visual media that address their user needs. It should also include current newspapers, magazines, and materials in various languages and reading levels. The prison library should help create an environment that motivates this specific group of library users to build, improve, and maintain their reading and writing skills. This can be supported by providing materials in multiple languages as well as easy-to-read options for prisoners with low literacy levels. Donated materials may supplement the collection if they are current and relevant, but they should not replace the acquisition of new, appropriate resources.

4. Providing library services and activities

In addition to offering access to books and information, the prison library can provide a range of services and activities. This includes library-related support, such as an introduction to the library and its services as part of the general orientation for new inmates. It is essential for prisoners to know about the library's existence, location, organization, and the services it offers. The prison library should also educate prisoners on how to use a library effectively, helping them become skilled library users both during their incarceration and after their reintegration into the community.

Services and programs can be coordinated in partnership with other prison departments, the local public library, community organizations, and external facilitators. Collaborating with outside institutions allows the prison to tap into the expertise of external specialists, creating both a connection and a bridge to the broader community.

The library should provide literacy activities and collaborate with prison schools or other institutions to support prisoners who want to improve their reading and writing skills. Literacy levels among prisoners should be carefully considered when designing and coordinating services and programs, tailoring some activities to ensure the library is an inclusive space for the entire prison population. Accessible materials, such as easy-to-read books, comics, spelling guides, dictionaries, vocabulary card sets, and other literacy resources, should always be available in both print and digital formats on tablets or computers whenever possible. The library should also organize and support a range of programs that encourage reading and creative expression, such as book clubs, creative writing workshops, author visits and readings, publishing a prison newspaper, or debate groups.

Access to cultural events and opportunities for artistic expression has been shown to foster emotional and intellectual growth, promote mutual understanding, and strengthen a sense of community identity. Whenever possible, the prison library should provide a space for diverse artistic and cultural events, including performances in dance, theatre, music, poetry, art exhibitions, celebrations of various cultures and ethnic groups, or film screenings.

Prison libraries can support family literacy through programs such as read-aloud recordings for incarcerated parents and their children, family reading sessions during visiting hours, and shared reading experiences. In some cases, family members may even borrow books from the library, allowing families to share reading materials and to spend quality time together during visits. Maintaining strong family connections enhances prisoners' rehabilitation prospects and lessens the impact of incarceration on families, especially children.

Prison libraries should also assist in preparing prisoners for reintegration by offering life skills programs and activities. To support work training and re-entry, the prison library can include skilled labour manuals and higher education resources in its collection, provide courses and support on resume writing, job searching, application processes, and interview techniques.

5. Information technology

The IFLA Guidelines highlight that “The prison library should make use of current information technology to the greatest extent possible” (Garner and Krolak, 2023: 35). Given the increasing role of digitization in society, prisoners must be given opportunities to develop and maintain digital literacy skills to aid in their reintegration. At the same time, digital collections should complement, not replace, physical collections and library activities.

The library should implement an automated circulation and catalogue system using standardized formats, and ideally, all regional prison libraries should use common software and a central catalogue to facilitate interlibrary lending and research. Additionally or alternatively, interlibrary lending can be explored with the public or national library. Prisoners should be able to access digital resources such as multimedia devices, legal databases, educational tools, and e-books, under supervision. Access to the internet, for both education and recreation, should ideally be made available and carefully managed to ensure safety.

6. International cooperation

In 2019, an international *Working Group on Prison Libraries* (IFLA, n. d.) was established in the framework of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, as an attempt to connect this global community. Its main aim was to update the *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*, which it did over the next years through various international consultations. The updated Guidelines were published in 2023. A global email listserv was established to facilitate communication between prison librarians and interested stakeholders from all over the world. Furthermore, a bibliography with research documents was compiled and an overview of working tools provided, both are constantly updated. Additionally, various online and in-person meetings about prison libraries were organized.

In October 2024, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg, Germany launched a collection of case studies on innovative prison education experiences. It includes six case studies with best experiences from prison libraries in Brazil, Chile, Norway, Philippines, Thailand, and the UK (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024). As this collection is an ongoing project, additional best practice examples will be added in the near future.

Currently, a *Community of Practice (CoP) of Prison Libraries* is under development at the UIL. This CoP will be a forum for networking, information sharing, and capacity development. Monthly webinars, which will be open to the general public, will start in 2025. These webinars will show one best practice example in each episode and give the opportunity for an informal discussion afterwards. Prison libraries often work in isolation and will therefore benefit from an opportunity to share experiences as it is important to share best practices, to learn from each other, and to continue to advocate for the right to education and access to information for prisoners.

7. Conclusion

This paper shows that well-funded and well-organized prison libraries can be a transformative meeting and learning space for the entire prison community, enabling prisoners to fulfill their human right to education. To make sure that prison libraries do not operate in isolation, they are encouraged to network with each other and to work closely with the local (public) library system. Taking security issues into account, inmates should be able to enjoy the same-quality library services and materials available to citizens living in freedom. This presentation on prison libraries, held at the 20th Round Table of the Croatian Library Association on *Inclusive and Accessible Libraries* (27 September 2024), was followed by a fruitful discussion on the topic of prison libraries in Croatia. It was agreed that the UIL policy brief on *How Prison Libraries Support Rehabilitation Efforts* (UIL, 2020) will be translated into Croatian. The thoughts shared in the policy brief and this paper will hopefully contribute to the future advocacy efforts and actions for strengthening prison libraries in Croatia.

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