

THE RIGHT TO READ: A PRISON STORY

By *Kirsten Wurmman*

“Some of the girls and I started a James Patterson book club. Can we get some copies?”

“Are there any beading or art books? I am showing some of the younger ones how to bead.”

“My girlfriend is pregnant; do you have any pregnancy books?”

“Dostoyevsky? Yeah!”

“This Cree dictionary will help me learn my language. My kokum will be happy!”

SOUNDS LIKE A TYPICAL DAY AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, RIGHT?

Sure—but these requests came from our community members serving time in Canadian prisons. Meeting these simple requests for information, books and library services can be difficult, even though access to information, knowledge, books and a library is a basic right. A right that now has its own nationally recognized statement: Prison Libraries Network: The Right to Read. (The full text of the statement appears on page 17.)

The Canadian Prison Libraries Network was formed in 2014 to endorse the fundamental right of incarcerated people to read, learn and access information and to provide a national forum for volunteers and staff involved with or interested in prison library services in Canada.

As the moderator and a founding member of the network, I am motivated by many guiding principles of librarianship such as providing access to information for all, upholding intellectual freedom and aiding the reintegration of inmates by providing resources and services to help them become more active, literate and informed participants in society.

The network drafted the Right to Read statement, which was adopted by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations in September 2016. This statement advocates for, and asserts the value of, libraries and access to information resources in correctional institutions, echoing recommendations set out in the 2015–16 report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator. In the report, the office recommends that Correctional Service Canada “update and renew inmate libraries so that they are compliant with policy and comparable to the services, materials and technologies available in community libraries.” The statement has since been shared with library associations, federal

and provincial justice ministries, media and other non-profits working within Canadian correctional institutions. We have asked everyone to consider endorsing and promoting this statement and, if possible, applying its principles within their library and community.

Imprisonment does not mean absolute forfeiture of rights. The Corrections and Conditional Release Act affirms that “offenders retain the rights of all members of society except those that are, as a consequence of the sentence, lawfully and necessarily removed or restricted.” Librarians have the responsibility to serve the entire community, including those serving time. Some prison policies do not prioritize principles of librarianship, and library workers need to understand and accept what can be done within the limits of time and bureaucracy, including the challenges of security, censorship and access.

Many prisons have complex processes for approving library materials, and they often conflict with principles of intellectual freedom. Restrictions could be interpreted as oppressive, racist or antiquated ideas of what inmates *should* be reading. There are often constraints on prison collections: no true crime, nothing sexually exploitative, nothing that promotes gang culture or lifestyle, nothing that is discriminatory and could create a hostile environment. Policies

of banning or censoring books are often undefined and arbitrary: sometimes no hardcovers, sometimes no magazines and always no Internet. In the institutions we serve, we have noted limited or no funding for collection development, inadequate library space and often no professional library staff.

Inmates need diverse materials and information to support their legal needs, rehabilitation, literacy skills, language needs, personal and cultural interests, recreational reading and lifelong learning, including technology awareness and access. The prison population in Canada is also aging and becoming more culturally diverse, and we must recognize that Indigenous people are disproportionately represented. There is an overwhelming need, and a corresponding responsibility to meet that need, for Indigenous resources related to histories, cultures, languages and the continuing effects of colonialism.

Let this be a call to action. People serving time in Canadian prisons will rejoin our communities. Should we not, as a society, help prepare them for reintegration? Let us start with books, a library and the right to read. 📖

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PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



“I just learned I have some Irish heritage. Where is your Irish poetry?”

“Do you have any books to help me become a better person?”

PRISON LIBRARIES NETWORK: THE RIGHT TO READ

For inmates in Canadian correctional institutions, reading and access to information is a rare connection to the outside world.

It is also a basic right.

The Prison Libraries Network asserts that incarcerated Canadians do not relinquish the rights and freedoms guaranteed to them under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In fact, certain freedoms, such as those of conscience and religion, thought, belief, opinion, and expression have a heightened importance behind bars.

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations' Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries asserts that Canadians' right to access information is essential to be able to advance themselves through literacy, lifelong learning, social engagement, and cultural enrichment. Prison libraries play a fundamental role in guaranteeing rights, not only by providing inmates with access to information about their legal rights as incarcerated persons, but also by providing the tools necessary to exercise these rights.

We call upon prison libraries to actively promote literacy as a continuum of learning that assists and allows incarcerated individuals to develop knowledge and potential, to achieve goals, and to participate fully in wider society. This literacy should be expanded to include skills to access knowledge through technology.

Prison libraries must be given the space necessary to provide access to

collections and library programs that meet inmates' recreational, cultural, educational and other information needs. As is required of them as supporters of intellectual freedom and access to information, prison libraries must provide inmates with the widest variety of materials possible, including access to legal materials. Collections and programming in prison libraries must also reflect the increase in the composition of ethnically and culturally diverse prisoner populations. Library professionals are central to the prison library mandate.

In addition, Canadian prisons must acknowledge their key role within a social and political system of ongoing colonialism. Indigenous peoples make up a percentage of the incarcerated population far higher than their proportion of Canada's general population—and the numbers of Indigenous peoples who are incarcerated continues to grow. Within this context, and at the request of Indigenous inmates, prison libraries have a responsibility to provide access to resources on Indigenous histories, cultures and languages, to books by Indigenous authors, and to materials about the impacts—and related healing processes—of colonialism.

The Corrections and Conditional Release Act states that all prisons in Canada must provide a range of programs to assist in the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates. In accordance, Commissioner's Directive 720 of the Correctional Service of Canada

stipulates that prisons have the responsibility to provide inmates with access to library services. The Commissioner's Directive also states that federal institutions should have access to library services that are similar to those offered in the community. By fulfilling this objective, prison libraries—and their counterparts in the community—can contribute to safer and healthier communities. This highlights an important function of the prison library: to mirror the “outside” world and help prepare inmates for release.

There is conclusive evidence of direct links between access to rehabilitative programs and lower rates of recidivism. When inmates' information rights are respected, their ability to grow positive connections both inside and outside of the prison setting grows. This area of personal growth helps to prepare them for their release. Outside of prisons, libraries in the community can play a critical role in supporting the successful reintegration of former inmates.

Correctional institutions are made better by the programs and information sharing opportunities that prison libraries provide. The vast majority of inmates held in Canadian correctional facilities will be released back into our communities with the potential of inmates to contribute to society as people with ideas, skills, and lived experiences. The provision of robust library services to inmates not only helps maintain basic rights, but also allows members of this population to explore their fullest potential.