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Floating libraries and Bible rolling papers: Accessing books and information while incarcerated

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Abstract

Introduction. Prisons are environments of restriction, including what and how inmates access books and information. As federal prisons in Canada do not allow internet access, physical books and prison libraries are of particular importance. This research, part of a larger project looking at inmate reading, explores how inmates access books and information.

Method. Interviews were conducted with 9 current inmates who were incarcerated in a men's minimum-security institution. A researcher and a research assistant conducted the interviews; the research assistant was a former inmate of that facility. Participants had been incarcerated from a few months to over 20 years and had come from a range of higher-security prisons.

Analysis. Preliminary analysis of the interviews was conducted using qualitative content analysis and categories and themes were developed through iterative discussions between authors.

Results. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the variability of experiences accessing books and information between prisons, highlighting the importance of understanding the context. Two themes were developed. The first covered the creative ways inmates access physical-only materials and the numerous barriers that exist. The second covered the need for inmates to navigate official prison policies and unofficial prison culture in order to access materials.

Conclusion. While some of the barriers to access were anticipated, participants also discussed the unique ways that inmates develop to increase their access to materials. Individuals (prison staff and inmates) can make a significant difference to access, and dedicated resources are required. Learning the specific institutional culture is key.

Introduction

Both society and individual inmates benefit when they engage positively within prisons and then successfully reintegrate into society. Access to libraries and books in prisons is foundational to an array of prosocial activities. As inmates in Canadian Federal Institutions are not generally allowed any internet access while incarcerated, physical books become a central source of information and as means—both formal and informal—to use the time in prison to meet a variety of personal and institutional goals.

Part of the central mandate of Correctional Service Canada is ‘actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens’ and thus education, self-improvement, job preparation, and civic-mindedness are all part of a rehabilitative mission. The National Guide for Institutional Libraries directs that Canadian federal prison libraries are to meet the needs of inmates, providing service that ‘emulates the public library model’ (Correctional Service Canada, 2012, p. 3) and should ‘provide inmates with the opportunity to pursue recreational, cultural, and spiritual interest’ (p. 3). However, the guide also recognises there are limitations to the service due to legislation, policy, and security considerations.

Information science researchers have long been interested in prison libraries (e.g., Austin, 2022; Curry et al., 2003; De Agostini, 2022; Garner, 2020; Ings & Joslin, 2011; Mostek, 2024), exploring topics such as reading habits, prison library policies and practices, and censorship and access. Censorship is common in prison libraries, often taking the form of content bans, such as restricting access to violent or sexual content (Mostek, 2024). Studies about access have looked at the ways prison restrict access to information, including restricting the internet (e.g., Canning, 2022) and using access to information to control inmate behaviour (Austin et al., 2020). While there is interest in prison libraries, there have been relatively few studies that have spoken directly to inmates about their own experiences. The notable exceptions to this are the work of Chatman (1999), Canning (2022), and Virgo (2024, 2025).

Chatman (1999) conducted a ground-breaking study of women in a maximum-security American prison, from which came her theory of ‘Life in the Round’. Chatman’s study builds on her previous work on small worlds (1991), stating that inmates reshape their own views to align with the norms within the small world of the prison. In this situation, insider information is important; contextual information is used to fit into the ‘everyday reality of prison life’ (Chatman, 1999, p. 208). Part of her theory of ‘Life in the Round’ was that those living in the round will only seek information from those who are inside their world unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Canning’s (2022) doctoral work was a study of inmates’ information needs and seeking in a maximum-security Scottish prison. Inmates’ information needs were varied; the most common were identified as ‘mental health, relationships, the prison regime, education, rehabilitation, reintegration, physical health, law, and recreational interests’ (p. 141). Barriers to meeting information needs were both physical and security-related; however, cognitive, affective, and coping issues were also found. Inmates demonstrated a clear preference for interpersonal sources who were judged trustworthy, and particularly those who had lived experience of incarceration.

Virgo’s (2025) study of the information behaviour of incarcerated university students who are released on temporary license during the week to attend university in the UK. In this study, inmates expressed experiencing information overload when transitioning from full incarceration to attending classes on campus, overwhelmed by the many things that they needed to know, and emphasising self-identified gaps in their knowledge. During that transition, inmates expressed feelings of isolation and having ‘nobody to ask’ (p. 570) when they had questions, highlighting barriers to filling information needs.

This paper –part of a larger project that seeks to understand inmate experiences of libraries, books, and reading while incarcerated – focuses on inmates' access to books and information.

Context

When accessing books and information in prisons, context is key. In this study, all participants were currently at a minimum-security federal prison and had spent time in other federal prisons. In this prison, library resources were limited to a small collection of donated books on shelves in a common area that functions without a librarian. A single computer is available to use to access electronic documents and locally available resources; however, inmates have no internet access, increasing the importance of accessing prison libraries and books through other means. Inmates engaged in schooling can type papers on the computer, but there is no private file storage, so documents can be accessed by others or even erased. There is an educational officer who works part time in the prison and provides extra reading materials, largely from the instructor's own personal collection. In addition, the local public library sends staff into the prison every two weeks. Inmates can request titles or topics from the library staff, which are brought on the subsequent visit, but significantly, there is no catalogue access. Aside from borrowing books, inmates can order books to purchase; however, there are limits on what they can own. When entering prison, inmates are allowed a 'pen pack' (i.e., a package of essential personal items sent to the newly incarcerated individual), which includes all clothing, personal care items, and entertainment items. It can cost no more than \$1500 CAD total, and this amount remains the maximum amount allowed. Books are allowed in pen packs but are part of the total dollar value; however, books that are deemed for religious or educational purposes are not included in the total. Funds for purchases are also often limited. Inmates can earn up to a maximum of \$6.90 CAD per day and items they purchase are not discounted. This would mean, for example, that the purchase of a new hardcover book would be nearly a week's wages. Purchased items are also subject to intense scrutiny and it can take weeks for this review to take place.

Research aim and questions

The larger research project explores inmates' book collecting and reading habits during their incarceration. In this paper we explore inmates' access to books and information, focusing primarily on prison libraries.

The research questions include:

1. How do inmates access books and information?
2. What barriers and facilitators do inmates experience?

Methods

Participants

Participants were inmates at a men's urban, minimum-security prison in Western Canada. The institution is small and intended for inmates who have been at higher-security institutions but have earned their way into a lower security placement.

The research assistant (RA) for this project is a former inmate of this institution (and other institutions). The RA made a valuable contribution to the project because of his understanding of the context and experience with being incarcerated. This insider information would not have been otherwise available to the researchers. The contributions included planning how the interviews should be carried out, suggesting some of the questions that should be asked, and helping to collect data. The RA and the lead researcher, with the facilitation of the Warden of the institution, attended in-person recruitment sessions to explain the project and solicit participants. Special precautions were taken to ensure participants felt comfortable in taking part in the

research. Research ethics approval was obtained from both The King's University Ethics Board and multiple research ethics boards of Correctional Service Canada.

Nine inmates agreed to take part in the research. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to early seventies and had been incarcerated from a few months to over 20 years. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection consisted of individual audio-recorded interviews, lasting approximately one hour, conducted by the lead researcher and the research assistant. The interviews were designed and co-conducted with the research assistant as he had insights and personal experience to help put current inmates at ease. The RA suggested two key adjustments to the interview protocol. The RA suggested undertaking the interviews in dyads. The team had debated who should do the interviews, wondering if incarcerated people would be more comfortable talking to a former inmate. However, the RA expressed that while his presence was important to help put the participants at ease, having a researcher there as well would give the process credibility. The RA also advocated for recording the interviews. The team also debated whether to record the interviews or not, having concerns about making participants feel surveilled. However, the RA articulated that many inmates have had experiences of feeling their words had been misrepresented and that recording interviews would help them to feel more comfortable that their words would be accurately represented.

The original plan was to do data analysis as a team, with both researchers and the RA. However, this was not possible, so the analysis was carried out by the researchers. Qualitative content analysis was used for the preliminary data analysis, which categorises data by means of patterns, conceptual categories, and themes (Julien, 2008). This analysis enables meaningful interpretation of the data as well as relationships between data. Both authors read the interviews iteratively and reviewed categories and themes, refining the themes through analysis and discussion.

Findings

Preliminary findings demonstrate the importance of books and prison libraries, as inmates have significant amounts of unoccupied time and restrictions on most activities. Reading books was frequently mentioned as a good use of time—entertainment with vocabulary or wellness benefits—and/or a way to better oneself by gaining new information, self-help strategies, or spiritual insights. Over the course of the interviews, participants discussed a wide array of ways to access books and information—both official and unofficial. Access varied widely across institutions with differing facilities, resources, and protocols, but the variations were also due to the influence of key individuals (especially librarians, but also educators, chaplains, and correctional officers) and changed according to inmate social networks.

In looking at these varied experiences, two themes developed. The first centred around the unique situation and challenges created by restricting inmates to only physical media. The second centred around needing to navigate official and unofficial aspects of prison life.

The unique access and barriers of paper books

As prisons provide no internet access, the access to the prison library and the quality of its contents became especially important. However, access to libraries is not always guaranteed. Rocky (an inmate in his 20s, incarcerated for 1.5 years) talked about being at a maximum/medium-security prison, Prison C, that when he arrived,

... was all locked down for some reason. I just kind of got there at a bad time. It was just unlucky. So I never actually went to the library there. But yeah, at [Prison C], there's a huge library there.

During lockdowns, inmates could get books brought around on a trolley, typically once a week.

Many higher-security prisons limited library access to specific days. Jeff (an inmate in his 30s who had been incarcerated for 3 months) mentioned having to request going to the library on specific days by putting a note in his cell window, which did not guarantee being able to go. It depended on whether correctional officers 'actually read the note'. Limits were also placed on the number of books borrowed, typically 3-5, depending on the institution. Several inmates found these numbers insufficient.

The minimum-security prison where the interviews took place, Prison A, was exceptional in that inmates could access books in the informal library at any time, and the local public library would come in every two weeks to bring requested titles or books on a particular topic. However, inmates had no access to the public library's catalogue, making book selection challenging. The public library visits were important as Prison A's 'library' consisted of shelves of books that were largely unorganised donations and library castoffs. Edwards (an inmate in his 70s, incarcerated for 1.5 years) noted, 'our library [at Prison A] isn't organized, right? Just kind of all over the place. So it could use some help. Even if you alphabeticalized [sic] them or something'. The lack of organization hampering access was mentioned by multiple inmates.

While some prison libraries were well-stocked, well-staffed, and well-organised, others had few books, damaged books, and were unorganised. Most inmates agreed that Prison B – a medium/minimum security prison – had a library almost as good as a public library. Part of this was due to the librarian, who worked hard to provide content and programming for inmates. Specific librarians and their contributions were mentioned by several inmates. The experience of Prison D differed significantly, though it was another medium/minimum security prison. Kirby (an inmate in his 40s, incarcerated for 2 years) stated,

At [Prison D], there was a library. It was accessible, but the selection wasn't the best. And the library times were limited to when you could go in. And a lot of the books were kicked in, wrecked, covers missing, pages missing, all that kind of stuff.

Physical books often showed signs of wear and damage. Some books had blood or other bodily fluids, some were torn, and some even had remnants of pepper spray on their pages. Missing sections of books were also a problem. Perry (an inmate in his 70s, incarcerated for 2.5 years) mentioned that 'many of the Bibles were missing a lot of the New Testament and Revelation because it made good paper roll' for cigarettes. Some reported the most frequently referenced sections of legal books being torn out, creating challenges accessing legal information.

Besides the library, books could be accessed through educational endeavours, through classes taken, from a small 'school library' (the educational officer has books that can be lent out), through religious organizations (chaplains have books that can be loaned), or through purchase. However, as mentioned previously, there is a monetary limitation for inmates. Rocky mentioned an officer who undervalued his books. 'With the books, like [the officer] could have charged me for what they were actually worth, but he charged me, I think it was 2 bucks for each book or something'. Not all books count towards your monetary limit. There are two exceptions—books that are religious, and books that are explicitly for educational purposes—but in both cases, someone must officially deem the books to belong to these categories. However books are obtained in these ways, inmates are dependent on others to facilitate this access.

Access depends on navigating official policies and unofficial culture of prisons

Some institutions went further in their official policies than those previously discussed. Prison B, with the excellent library, developed a library culture of respect for books. Kirby discussed how that library's policies affect access:

Now, with that system that they have in place in [Prison B], you have to earn the right to take a book out. So you can't just go in off the first day and take a book out. So you have to kind of build a bit of a rapport with them. So you go in there, maybe you get some books, you sit down in there, you read them, check them out, return them in mint condition. Then they'll start you off with one book and you've got two weeks with that book.

Kirby also mentioned serious consequences in Prison B for damaged books, which was an 'institutional charge' (formal disciplinary action taken for rule violation), as well as 'being responsible for the price of the book. So it did keep books in good condition for sure'.

While official policies govern so much of inmates' lives, inmates also develop their own culture around books. Unofficial collections of books are important resources. As Jeff (an inmate in his 30s, incarcerated for 3 months) discussed, 'some of the books that weren't labelled from their library that floated around on the ranges [corridors with multiple cells] and in the buildings. So, that's another thing, people were hoarding them ...' When he ran out of books, Jeff would look at communal shelves, which normally hold microwaves or coffee pots, or in the laundry room, to find these floating collections.

Some collections floated, but others belonged to inmates. Books are an important object of exchange between inmates but typically were only lent to those that were friends or deemed trustworthy. Kirby discussed lending as including a 'level of respect' because inmates have so few possessions. In some prisons, particularly maximum-security, inmates had their own protocols for book circulation. Jones (an inmate in his 30s, incarcerated for 10 years) related,

oddly enough, a lot of the tough guys would monitor the books because otherwise no one would get through the stuff. We were there when *Game of Thrones*, [was] just like coming out, for example. So it was like, 'OK, everybody's going to go through it, if you're not going to read it, you get put to the back of the line.

Evidenced by Jeff's and Jones' quotes, many inmates deeply valued their access to books. The interviews affirmed that books in particular were an important means not only to pass the time in a positive way, but also as a part of self-improvement, mental wellness, and in some cases, spiritual development. Multiple inmates expressed their desire to develop their reading skills and to acquire knowledge for personal, social, or employment reasons through books. As Kirby said, 'I think when it comes to when it comes to prison, it's just accessibility. That's really the biggest thing'.

Discussion and conclusions

In answering RQ1 (How do inmates access books and information?), participants described the very prison-dependent ways they access books, including the official policies to visit prison libraries and check out books. Unsurprisingly, the highly rules-based approach to life in a prison also applies to prison libraries. However, even following rules and regulations, books and information were not always accessible and information needs (entertainment, legal, educational, and other types of information about incarcerated life and life on the outside) were not always being met. With complicated and sometimes fractured systems, inmates had to get creative to access materials and work around the barriers they experienced. That said, participants did not express experiencing information overload – unlike Virgo's (2025) participants who were transitioning from full-time incarceration; they needed to know the formal and informal rules and social norms within their prison. As with previous research, participants noted that access to prison library books and

information was used as a form of 'behavioural control' (Austin et al., 2020, p. 175), including Prison B's policy of earning the right to borrow books and the possibility of an 'institutional charge' if books were damaged. While our interview questions focused on formal library policies, inmates also described accessing books and information informally through floating libraries, personal collections, and inmate lending. In this case, behaviour control was also asserted about borrowing books; however, in this case it was inmates who set the boundaries for behaviour about how books circulate and how long anyone had with the new *Game of Thrones*. Not following the established rules risked sanctions or exclusion, highlighting the importance of learning how things are done between inmates. In Chatman's (1999) terms, these are 'insiders' setting social norms and asserting social control. The argument can be made that participants in this study occupy a 'small world' (Chatman, 1991). And while those in a small world focus on 'practical dimensions of life' (p. 445), it does not follow that information behaviour in a small world is simplistic. The complexity of understanding official policies, social norms, and ways to work around barriers demonstrate the complexities involved in accessing books and information within a prison.

In answering RQ2 (What barriers and facilitators do inmates experience?), participants noted ways that prison staff could act as both barriers or facilitators to access. Participants described how some individuals went above and beyond to ensure that any inmate interested in materials had access, including librarians, educators, chaplains, and public library staff who visit the prison. While policies are there to ensure a certain level of access, it is often individuals in the prison system that make a significant difference to the level of access. Participants also discussed the power staff had in making monetary decisions that could also influence access. With having a limit to the total cost of possessions, if staff choose to count books at their full retail price or not, or count books as educational or religious or not (these books do not count towards the possessions total), this could have a significant impact on what possessions inmates could have, particularly as inmates have limited means of making money while incarcerated. They also described instances of officers not bringing inmates down to the library, due to lockdowns or staff shortages. A basic barrier described was the lack of internet access, an issue found in other studies (Bajić et al., 2021; Canning, 2022). Interestingly, there were no explicit discussions of prison staff censoring materials beyond the limitation of sexual content and children's materials; this topic is frequently mentioned as an issue in prison libraries (Austin et al., 2020; Mostek, 2024). Participants also described barriers as limitations to when libraries can be accessed, libraries with poor collections and/or in poor condition, and libraries that are unorganised and/or have no catalogue. De Agostini (2022) critiques poorly resourced Canadian prison libraries as 'making it impossible for prison librarians to meet the minimum human rights requirements of the people they serve' (p. 1). Conversely, participants described some prison libraries as welcoming, well-stocked, and with staff that work to ensure a variety of books are available to meet inmates' needs. Canning (2022) found that librarians were positively perceived and recognised by some inmates as a source of information. What we found was that when accessing books and information there were an array of libraries – floating, personal, chaplain, educational, and official libraries – each that required specialised, context-specific knowledge about how to access them.

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