



Information Needs of Inmates

LESTA N. BURT

LITTLE PUBLISHED information is available on the information needs of inmates of correctional facilities; however, much can be gleaned from those articles that are available concerning general or educational needs of inmates. Many articles focus on the fact that after the basic physiological needs of food, safety and shelter are met, the higher basic needs of "belongingness and love" and "esteem and self-actualization"¹ need to be met in a prison setting.² This achievement is difficult because of the prison setting itself, and because of the type of person who is usually incarcerated.

General profiles of the "average" prisoner are found in the literature. According to the 1966 President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice³ and the Draper conference (1967),⁴ the inmate generally has an unstable work record, is impulsive and overreactive, and has difficulty in planning ahead or considering alternatives. While seemingly glib and smooth, he is fearful, and lashes out in hostility or uses manipulation. Furthermore, many have medical problems. In 1972 William McCullough⁵ stated that about one-half of the inmates score below the fifth-grade level on standardized achievement tests and have mental and emotional problems.

INFORMATION NEEDED ON PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

The failure syndrome must be overcome and the self-concept improved before significant learning can take place. Jeffries⁶ points out that the inmate's self-concept is often distorted and that he needs books on personality development, personal growth, and the mind and how it works. Roth reports that inmates usually consider themselves academic failures and that: "Self-improvement follows self-respect in the process of rehabilitation, *and the chance to complete one's high school education is a necessary step.*"⁷ Mildred Moody believes that a

Lesta N. Burt is Director and Professor, Library Science Department, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

skill does not change motivation and that reading guidance, book discussion groups, and library activities planned as adjuncts to therapy and education can provide the motivation for change.⁸

In September 1972, Bernard W. Detlefsen, curriculum coordinator of the Windham Independent School District at the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC), conducted an inmate interest survey of student inmates to use in curriculum planning.⁹ A total of 4,199 inmates in 13 units of TDC replied to the survey, which listed 91 subjects. Teachers read the survey to the students, who then marked the answers. It is significant that the five subjects most frequently chosen dealt with ways to handle health, emotions, and human relations problems. The twenty-five most popular subjects are listed below, preceded by the number of inmates preferring each subject.

- 2,123 Body Health
- 2,131 Understanding Emotions
- 2,122 You and the Law
- 2,112 Human Relations
- 2,013 Sex Education
- 1,924 Music Appreciation
- 1,917 Negro History
- 1,801 Welding
- 1,771 Math (General)
- 1,708 Psychology
- 1,683 Typing
- 1,678 Drug Education
- 1,645 Home Repairs
- 1,632 Arts and Crafts
- 1,621 Social Relations
- 1,591 Dance
- 1,587 Development of Man (Prehistoric to Modern Man)
- 1,582 General Mechanics
- 1,580 Marriage Problems
- 1,570 Radio, TV Repair
- 1,531 Track and Field
- 1,513 Basketball
- 1,501 Principles of Automobiles
- 1,476 Labor Problems
- 1,474 Baseball

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SUBJECT INTERESTS OF INMATES

This writer conducted a nonrandom interest survey in TDC's Ferguson and Goree units (for young first offenders and women, respectively) in 1968.¹⁰ The range of subjects was not nearly as great nor as closely tied to the curriculum as was Detlefson's. The most popular subject category for the men was history and for women was poetry, with poetry ranking second for men. The Detlefson survey did not include poetry; history, as a general subject, was not listed—the historical topics of Negro history and the development of man which were listed, however, ranked seventh and seventeenth in popularity, respectively.

Constance House¹¹ administered a reading interest survey in June 1974 at the Ferguson and Goree units while she was a graduate student in library science at Sam Houston State University. As participants in a federally funded institute to train correctional facility librarians, House and several other students engaged in a study to determine the effect of group book discussion on inmate attitudes. The idea for the reading interest survey arose from this study. House included fiction with nonfiction in her survey and asked the respondents to rank their preferences. Many respondents marked only their first choice, which was fiction. Other than the 36 percent of the white males who listed "travel" as their fourth choice, the preferences were dispersed over a wide range of subjects. Women as a group preferred fiction, biography and poetry. The greatest overall travel interest was European travel; however, the preference among black men within the travel category was for Africa (86 percent). Black women demonstrated an interest in traveling to Africa which was only one-half as strong (40 percent).

The need of white inmates for cultural identity could account for their strong expression of interest in travel in Europe. Jeffries¹² brings up the interesting point that whites, as well as blacks, Latinos, Chicanos, and native Americans, have a need for cultural awareness and identity, and a need to develop dignity and pride. According to Jeffries, inmates are interested not only in books concerning the backgrounds from which they have come, but also in books on poetry and writing, art, music, nationalism and revolution, Africa and China, philosophy, psychology, Westerns, detectives, and science fiction.

William Coons spent fifteen months in Attica before the riot and reports that it was difficult for inmates to get permission to go to the poorly stocked library, although "there is a will among a prison

population to raise the level of consciousness, to find some means of bettering one's condition."¹³ Coons found an amazing amount of interest in works dealing with the more abstract elements of human thought, such as philosophy, theosophy, religion, and contemporary social sciences. Books on these subjects are generally ordered by inmates or sent to them by people outside the institution.

Emilio Cosio¹⁴ reports that history and biography hold the lead in increased nonfiction reading. Those inmates with a higher educational level are interested in books dealing with philosophy, psychology and sociology, as well as warfare, aviation and ships. He also reports a great interest in travel.

The needs of inmates, reports Carl Reed,¹⁵ often turn out to be different from what has been anticipated. The warden of Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh—who, in this writer's opinion, should be commended for asking for volunteer librarian service when so many wardens refuse such an offer by zealous librarians—anticipated that the inmates would like a library filled with light, recreational reading; however, the residents requested textbooks for English and math, shop and car repair manuals, and black literature (75 percent of the population is black).

In 1974 Rhea Rubin encountered many difficulties in establishing library services in the Cook County Jail in Chicago. She was, however, able to supply "needed books, magazines, and cassettes for art, legal research, Swahili, hygiene, literacy, motivation courses given by inmates for other inmates, and the GED classes offered by the Catholic Church"¹⁶ before she was allowed to set up the library. There are fewer programs in jails than in state and federal institutions, although the people in jails especially need library service. Rubin also points out that it is very important that inmates be given the opportunity to select library materials, because it is one of the few areas in which they have a choice. She reports that ethnic literature, current periodicals, self-improvement materials, and poetry were most in demand. It is necessary to take inmate interest into consideration when selecting magazines and newspapers as well as books and audiovisual materials.

House¹⁷ found that importance was placed on the need for current information; inmates in her survey had expressed a strong desire to read magazines and newspapers. Newspapers as a source of information would serve the further purpose of keeping residents in touch with the "outside world," thus reducing institutionalization and facilitating their reintegration into society. The inmates' responses to the sections of a newspaper they read in the House survey were

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different from what has been reported in earlier reading interest surveys of the general population. The women preferred news about world affairs, civil rights, and politics and government to a greater extent than did the men surveyed. In addition, white women cited an interest in editorials and letters to the editor. The reverse results had been reported in the past. Although the white female interest in the women's section of the newspaper (80 percent) is predictable, the 7 percent interest expressed by black women was not expected. (Even black males expressed a greater interest (14 percent) in the women's section than did black women.) Both groups of women showed an equally high level of interest (80 percent) in the horoscope section.

Studying the informational needs of the inmates in one male and one female institution in Illinois, Jeffries found that standard magazines were ignored, but that *National Enquirer*, *Mohammed Speaks* and *Guardian* were well read.¹⁸

Cosio¹⁹ reported that the receipt of seventy-five different newspapers brought a 100 percent increase in library attendance at the Central Correctional Institution in South Carolina. He speculated that this was probably because these newspapers were, in many cases, the inmates' only contact with news from their home town. This writer found, however, that the male inmates surveyed at the Wisconsin State Reformatory at Fox Lake had a phenomenal knowledge of world affairs;²⁰ therefore, it would seem that inmates read newspapers and magazines even if home town newspapers are not available.

Group discussion on books, newspapers, films, etc., is another method of sharing information and increasing access to it. The majority of the inmates queried in the House study indicated that they would like to take part in book discussion groups. Several participants in the Institute to Train Correctional Institution Librarians mentioned above have informed its director that they have established group book discussions in their facilities. One Texas institution warden confirms the intellectual stimulation the book discussions afford.

Suvak²¹ reports that use of a prison library is about ten times as heavy as use of "outside" libraries. He says fiction is twice as popular as nonfiction; the most popular material is reported to be Westerns, mysteries, occult literature, and Islam. Most studies of adult reading interests find that the ratio of recreational to informational material read is two to one. A comparison of these results indicates that inmates have a greater desire for information than the average adult.

Another factor which must be taken into account in providing informational material for inmates are the groups within the inmate population, such as "Islam," "Motorcycle Gang," Jewish community, etc. Suvak states that it is the responsibility of the library to provide materials which will facilitate learning for all groups. Frank Andrews²² points out that a collection soon grows stale with a stable and controlled population and that a liberal budget is therefore necessary. Andrews also states that libraries were formerly set up in prisons as a kind of tokenism; with the emphasis now being placed on education, however (even some colleges offer courses in penal institutions), the need for a good library with a strong reference section is obvious.

Accounts in the literature emphasize increased circulation when new books are added to the collection. Curro²³ states that a nonfiction and reference collection on location at the Erie County Penitentiary in Alden, New York, which is operated as a station of the Erie County Public Library, circulated 6,000 books to 170 inmates in its first year of expanded services. The old library was small and the books were old; men formerly ordered books from the cellblock through catalogs, and the books were sent to them. Inmates are now able to come to the New York library. Accessibility is clearly an important factor in library use. In 1971, Rittenhouse²⁴ reported a monthly circulation of 1,550 books to 226 inmates at the Erie County Penitentiary. The new collection was developed with the help of instructors, correction officers, inmates, and the Erie County Public Library staff. The teachers requested nonfiction materials in the third- to twelfth-grade range. Rittenhouse reported the inmates' reading interests to be the same as usually reported for the general population.

INFORMATION FLOW

Jeffrey Schrank reports in "The Institution Trap" that: "information flow from the staff to the members is restricted. Staff usually knows much more than they admit."²⁵ This writer, however, has found that the inmates usually think that the staff members are withholding information which they actually do not possess. There is a tendency for inmates to suspect ulterior motives when new programs, etc., are initiated because the inmates feel vulnerable. Correctional institution staff can, however, take advantage of the current awareness service provided by the Law Enforcement Education Act (LEEA) to acquire information which would help in dealing with inmates and in passing on substantive information to them. This would theoretically give inmates food for thought and reduce their constant, nonproductive search for the "inside dope." Many times,

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staff, as well as inmates, do not know what avenues of information exist—the current awareness service of LEEA and interlibrary loan being two examples. For instance, it is well known by the professional librarian that interlibrary loan is an important resource for answering informational needs when there is a constant collection which has a constant population. This service is relatively new in prisons, because few prisons have had professional librarians who are aware of interlibrary loans and the methods for acquiring materials by this method.

Margaret Cheeseman states that borrowing materials is an essential function of the institution library program; “however, this means, as a minimum, a knowledge of resources and methods, and some bibliographic tools.”²⁶ Rubin, for example, fills all requests by interlibrary loan if the requests are too specialized to merit purchasing.²⁷ She and her staff are very careful to explain how and when a request will be filled in order to establish and keep trust. Shinn concurs with Cheeseman, stating that interlibrary loan should be made available to all inmates, including access to law library materials.²⁸ Andrews reported in 1973 that Rahway prison receives interlibrary loan materials from Woodbridge Public Library with federal grant funds.²⁹ Suvak³⁰ states that interlibrary loan is an important factor for inmates involved in serious ongoing research.

The prison library studies which were required as a condition to the receipt of federal monies from LSCA Title IV pointed out that interlibrary loan is an important part of library service. These studies further found that the librarian in the institution was the most important element in determining the use that was made of the library. The librarian was responsible for choosing material that was relevant for the inmate population and furnished the all-important need for a human being who cares.

SELECTION

One question in the House survey described earlier asked if there were specific books the respondents would like to read which their library did not possess. Sixty percent of the men and 33 percent of the women listed a specific title. Aline House, director of libraries for the Windham Independent School District, who also helped to compile the survey results, ordered these books. This response would indicate that inmates need to be included on book selection committees so that their informational and recreational needs can become known. It would seem that a suggestion box, at the very least, should be established in every institution.

Andrews placed a library suggestion box at the entrance to the dining hall at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey.³¹ He reported that the largest nonfiction demand came in art, essays, heritage, history, religion, poetry, philosophy, politics and occultism. He also reported that there was an overwhelming demand for escape-oriented matter and a Spanish-language collection.

Selection of materials cannot be separated from information needs, because the materials which meet those needs must obviously be made available. William Clontz, an inmate librarian in Georgia, recommends that a selection committee composed of responsible inmates, members of the prison staff, and public librarians in the area select the materials for a prison library.³² He states further that members of the committee should speak with inmates to determine their interests because much money has been wasted on books selected without a knowledge of inmate reader interests. Shinn³³ believes that the institution librarian should be on the state board of corrections and should involve correctional officers on a library committee. In this way support for the library may be gained and input of the officer's knowledge can be secured. Cheeseman points out that when selection has been used, it has not been geared to the interests and needs of the patrons, "but to a 'balanced collection' and 'books that they ought to read.'"³⁴

The limited vocabulary and reading skills of many inmates also need to be taken into consideration in the selection process in correctional institutions. Because of the large number of inmates whose language skills need to be improved, it is the opinion of this writer that a paperback dictionary should be given to every inmate who indicates an interest in owning one. In response to a question about the kind of problems experienced in trying to improve their reading, the majority of the inmates in the House survey listed vocabulary as being the greatest problem. When writing letters and doing school assignments, spelling becomes an obstacle which a good dictionary could partially alleviate. Cosio³⁵ reported that dictionaries were in great demand by inmates, thus substantiating this need in other states.

Jeffries³⁶ points out that inmates have the same recreational and information desires as the general public, but need the materials written for adults with a low educational level. Cosio found a high readership for low-vocabulary books and has stated that large-print books are in demand by both the visually handicapped and the slow reader.³⁷

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The inmates of correctional facilities have a wide range of informational needs; therefore, materials of varying levels of difficulty need to be made available.

INFORMATIONAL PROGRAMS

Morgan³⁸ of Arizona outlined the program he envisioned for the libraries of correctional facilities in Arizona to include discussion groups, structured library use courses, interlibrary loan, readers' interest profiles, and bibliographies for the staff and residents. These promotional and instructional programs are as important as selecting and organizing the right material.

An interesting concept was being pursued in 1973 at Lucasville—that of “tutor librarian”—a concept borrowed from the British, according to Suvak. Persons knowledgeable in selected subjects are available at a desk in the prison library, not only to provide reference assistance, but to offer aid in solving problems, working through material, and making learning contacts. Suvak stated that: “Tutor librarians generally help open up fields of interest to the prison residents through prolonged contact in which the subject area is explained in depth.”³⁹

Lovett discusses the kind of information service which is possible when professional staffing is provided in institutions:

Professional staffing has made it possible to develop an information service such as the names and addresses of agencies from which the inmates or their families can obtain help; information on the rights of prisoners, the poor and the veteran; form letters to use when requesting information; the use of a typewriter; and legal material from the county or state law libraries.⁴⁰

Provision of booklets which would contain information on where to receive legal, housing, food, library, and other types of information in the inmates' home area or destination (to give to inmates as a parting gift from the librarian) was stressed in the Institute to Train Correctional Institution Librarians held at Sam Houston State University. Vern Costa is one of the participants in this institute who has printed such an informational bulletin for his patrons in a California correctional facility. Rubin also compiled a release information packet for inmates of the Cook County Jail.⁴¹ Haering⁴² reports that the library is an important resource during an inmate's preparole period. Through the up-to-date directories of social agencies, legal resources, drug

programs, and local newspapers with employment ads, many inmates were able to present credible plans to their parole boards which helped promote their release.

The State of Illinois has developed a comprehensive plan for library service which includes all public libraries, the state library and all institutional libraries.⁴³ Library service is provided through the state library, including funding and librarians. Service is provided through contractual arrangements with the ten public library systems embracing the correctional facilities and regional offices. This plan assures that the institutional libraries will be comparable to libraries on the "outside." Cosio⁴⁴ reported that the South Carolina Department of Corrections began to organize library services for their seven correctional institutions with professional assistance for the first time in history because of LSCA Title IV-A funds.

The rights of prisoners for legal materials have been mentioned in many articles since the *Gilmore v. Lynch* decision was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court. States have developed different ways of complying with this ruling. Jeffries reports that Illinois has supplied all adult institutions with \$15,000 law collections and photocopying services and, it is to be hoped, "will provide legal counseling, typewriters and necessary legal and carbon paper."⁴⁵ LeDonne, who conducted a nationwide study of libraries in correctional institutions, reported in 1974 that law materials were the most important concern to inmates.⁴⁶ In most states there was limited access to materials, lack of scope and currency of materials, and a need for professional assistance. The Texas Department of Corrections secured a federal grant to buy law collections for its penal institutions. Lawyers are provided for the inmates because of the complexity of law terminology.

Correctional institution libraries have come a long way, from the few personal books loaned by chaplains to inmates to the well-stocked libraries manned by professional librarians in some institutions in some states. Title IV of LSCA is responsible for the very existence of libraries in some correctional institutions. Library service and collections are very uneven across the nation—and even within the states, according to a nationwide survey done by the author.⁴⁷

It is most important that the informational needs of inmates be met. If one believes in library service, one must believe that everyone should have the opportunity for it. There should be special concern that residents of correctional facilities be provided with the best possible service, because those on the "inside" now will be on the

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"outside" soon. Every means of assuring that inmates return to society as good citizens should be utilized.

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