Censorship in Prison Libraries

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Introduction

Prison libraries face different forms of censorship because of their dual nature as a library and as a function of the prison system. As such, they follow more rigorous standards for collection development and are constrained by other prison rules and regulations. Prisoners’ intellectual freedom is limited in library settings due to these regulations.

Censorship

Censorship as "a variety of processes...formal and informal, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display, dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expression" (Arford 29)

Much of the censorship in prisons is seemingly arbitrary, varies widely from state to state (Arford 52)

Censorship Takes Many Forms

• Incoming and outgoing mail
• Library books
• Gifts/donations to individuals
• Internet use

Content Frequently Censored

• Threat to Security
• Pornography
• Social Activism
• Theories of Revolution
• Books which glamorize crime
• Hate speech/violence toward certain groups (Roberts 78)

Collection Development

• Don’t have formal collection development policies. Must instead follow the prison regulations for what types of materials are allowed/banned.
• Don’t have the final say on purchase orders. Items can be removed or changed by the Warden, Prison Board, Commissioner of Corrections and no notice of these changes has to be given to the Librarian.
• Limited funds for purchasing new materials. Many prison libraries rely on donations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, publisher castoffs.

Role Conflict of Prison Librarians

State Expectations

• Coordinate rehabilitation and reentry programs and services (Doyle 1)
• Support the institution’s educational mission (Conrad 409)

Librarian

• Duties of public and school librarian (Arford 222)
• Prisoner information needs (recreational, educational, vocational, literacy, cultural)
• Gatekeeper to information
• Legal resources

Enforcer

• Assist custody staff with maintaining order and discipline (Arford 222)
• Must follow prison regulations and rules for collection development

Views on the Prison Librarian

• Seen by other prison staff as outsider or civilian
• Seen by prisoners as untrustworthy, functionary of the system

Can Intellectual Freedom exist in Prison Libraries?

Role of Prison vs. Library

Prison is a place of punishment for crimes committed, library is a means of lessening the isolation, loneliness, miserableness of being in prison

Are prisoners forfeiting their rights?

• Most scholars and administrators say yes
• "Legitimate penological interests"
• First Amendment Rights

Privacy in Prison

Unsure whether prisoners have a right to privacy, their records could be used for later investigatory procedures

Conclusions

What’s the solution?

• Have firm collection development and censorship policies and validate with prison administration
• Work with prison staff and board to create an environment that fosters learning and safety
• Partner with NGOs to provide current, relevant materials that meet patron interests and learning goals

“Where should the line be drawn between protecting the institution and censoring?” (Conrad 408)

ALA Guidelines

Prisoner Right to Read Statement
• Revised in 2010
• Defended prisoners’ intellectual freedom
• Censorship discouraged
• Focus on upholding security of institution

International Guidelines

IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners
• Revised in 2005
• Focused on improve literacy skills, lifelong learning, education levels, personal lives
• Emulate the public library model
• Focus on upholding security of institution

“Where does the prison librarian draw the line in granting or denying library materials?” (Conrad 408)

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