PRISM Project: Are PRISon libraries Motivators of pro-social behavior and successful re-entry?

The Library Research Service (LRS), an office in the Colorado State Library, a unit of the Colorado Department of Education will conduct a first of its kind outcome-based evaluation of prison libraries, the PRISM Project, which seeks to find out the outcomes of prison library services related to pro-social behaviors in incarcerated people and their successful re-entry into broader society. This study is based on a planning grant (LG-97-18-0127-18) and will directly partner with Institutional Library Development at the Colorado State Library, Remerg, a Colorado-based reentry organization, and the Colorado Department of Corrections. The Colorado Department of Education is seeking $103,681.70 for this project.

Project Justification

There are 1,833 state prisons[1] in the United States, with 1,311,100 people incarcerated in them[2]. While many of these facilities have libraries that are used by institution residents, there has never been a large-scale outcomes-focused study on prison libraries. This leaves a gap in the library community's knowledge about the impact of these libraries. This study will fill that gap and it will create a survey instrument and a scalable research plan that can be replicated in other states to learn more about their specific prison libraries and contribute to this first of its kind body of knowledge about prison libraries. The information gained in this study will support prison library services and demonstrate their value to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and the communities to which they belong and return to after their incarceration.

The PRISM Project supports IMLS Goal 2: "Build the capacity of libraries and archives to lead and contribute to efforts that improve community well-being and strengthen civic engagement" and it will support Objective 2.1, "develop or enhance replicable library programming, models, and tools that engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds." Right now, the prison population and the libraries that serve them have no outcomes-based assessments available, which makes it impossible to determine how to improve library services and without the knowledge of whether those libraries are contributing to pro-social behaviors for incarcerated people or supporting them as they rejoin our communities. By building this knowledge, we will have the opportunity to make positive impacts on communities, in and outside of prisons, throughout Colorado and the rest of the United States. This study will allow us to generate data that will establish a unique dataset that prison librarians can use and that will be able to be added to by states and territories that choose to use the study design and survey instrument that will be established in the PRISM Project. It is crucial that we include the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in the research about library services, which is uniquely foregrounded in this research study. This study will allow prison libraries to have the same outcomes-focused evaluation tools and understandings that academic and public libraries have, which directly strengthens the community and advances access to relevant collections for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated members of the community.

Project Work Plan

The PRISM Project will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. Identify outcomes of prison library use experienced by incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated people. Of special interest are outcomes related to developing and sustaining pro-social behaviors, information literacy and learning skills, and preparing incarcerated people for successful re-entry to the community.

2. Identify types of collections, programs, and services associated with positive outcomes of prison library use in the view of the service users.

3. Identify ways prison libraries can improve their impact on pro-social behaviors and successful re-entry, either by increasing the variety of positive outcomes to which they contribute or by improving their effectiveness in contributing to current, known positive outcomes.

This project will use the survey instrument developed in the planning grant[3], with slight modifications for use with incarcerated people. The research team will engage an IRB to review the plan prior to the start of data collection. Data collection will take approximately eight months, ending in April 2023. The analysis and reporting phase will take 13 months, ending in May 2024. Data collection will begin with 8 informational focus groups with formerly-incarcerated

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[1] https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html
[2] https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/people-in-jail-and-prison-in-2020.pdf
[3] https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/prism_survey

people, 2 for each region in Colorado. The survey portion will involve substantial outreach; there are 20,003[4] people incarcerated in prisons in the state of Colorado and 10,528[5] people currently on parole. The LRS research team, in collaboration with Institutional Library Development at the CO State Library, will give surveys in person at Colorado prisons, collecting a sample size of 267. The Remerg team will conduct the focus groups and will give the surveys to formerly incarcerated people across Colorado, collecting a survey sample size of 264. The LRS research team will work with the research contractor to refine the survey instrument and develop the questions for focus groups. The Department of Corrections will allow the research team to have access to internal prisoner data, including disciplinary and behavioral records, which will be anonymized and analyzed to help determine the impact of library services on the behavior of incarcerated people. The information gathered will be analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods by an outside consultant, to determine the outcomes of library services in prisons. This project will be considered a success if we are able to conduct the focus groups and surveys as described, gain access to institutional data from Colorado Department of Corrections, and analyze and report on that data to the broader library community.

Diversity Plan

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are a sensitive and socially marginalized group and the research team is committed to following best practices for research with sensitive populations. We will engage translators when speaking with people who are more comfortable in a language other than English within focus groups. We will also provide incentives whenever possible to people participating in the focus groups and in the surveys, to ensure that the members of this socially and economically marginalized group are realizing immediate benefit for their participation and support of the research..

Project Results

This project will provide the library community with groundbreaking information on the outcomes of prison libraries from the patrons themselves, something which is unique in the field of corrections libraries and correctional institutions. When it is complete, it will give corrections librarians from Colorado access to real data about their community and provide librarians from outside Colorado access to this information and a model for how to get the same from their unique prison populations. The data repository will grow as more states are able to replicate this study, much like the dataset for Project Outcome has grown for public and academic libraries.

The research will be developed into a formal report for dissemination to partners and librarians throughout the state of Colorado and nationally, via listservs and other direct methods. This research product will be housed on the PRISM website[6], a central and nationally accessible site. The data will be housed on the LRS.org website, which already functions as a repository for library assessment and research data. This data will remain wholly accessible to the public, except for the data that is shared by the Colorado Department of Corrections, which will be fully anonymized and accessible only in aggregate. This broad access to the data, the survey instrument, and the research design, will allow other states to undertake similar research studies and to add to the created database and build national information about the outcomes of prison libraries across different correctional environments. A webinar and training video for further implementation of this project will be developed and the research team will apply to present this information at the ALA Annual Conference in the year after the study closes in order to reach as many corrections librarians as possible to encourage further iterations of this study across the United States.

Budget Summary:

$54,158 – research contractor (TBD) – to analyze data and create reports

$21,000 – interview and focus group support (Remerg) – includes travel costs

$7,500 in travel costs for Colorado State Library to visit up to 22 state prisons across Colorado, includes recording equipment

$3,500 software and equipment, including recording equipment

$4,000– interview incentives for participants

$13,523,70 -- indirect costs

$103,681.70 Total

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[4] 2018, Colorado Department of Corrections Statistical Report

[5] Ibid.

[6] https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/prism