

PRISM Planning Project Evaluation Report

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

September 2020

Following the completion of a research design document by RSL Research for the PRISM Planning project, funded by IMLS, this evaluation was conducted using two methods: 1) administer a survey of partner organizations (re-entry organizations and libraries) who will support the project if funded and; 2) submit an email interview question to the PRISM advisory committee and staff for feedback regarding research design.

Survey of PRISM Partners

On September 8, 2020, a brief online survey launched and emails sent to 26 partnering organizations; 14 of which were libraries and 12 re-entry organizations. The purpose of this evaluation survey was to assess the viability of the research design and whether partners were prepared to participate in the project if funded. Three questions were asked as specified by the funded planning proposal using a Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree to the following 3 statements:

1. The research design has the potential to generate high-quality, actionable data about the contributions of prison libraries to the lives of ex-offenders.
2. The research design is sufficient for the findings to inform our organization about library contributions to ex-offenders' pro-social skills development and re-entry preparation.
3. Our organization is prepared to participate in the envisioned research project.

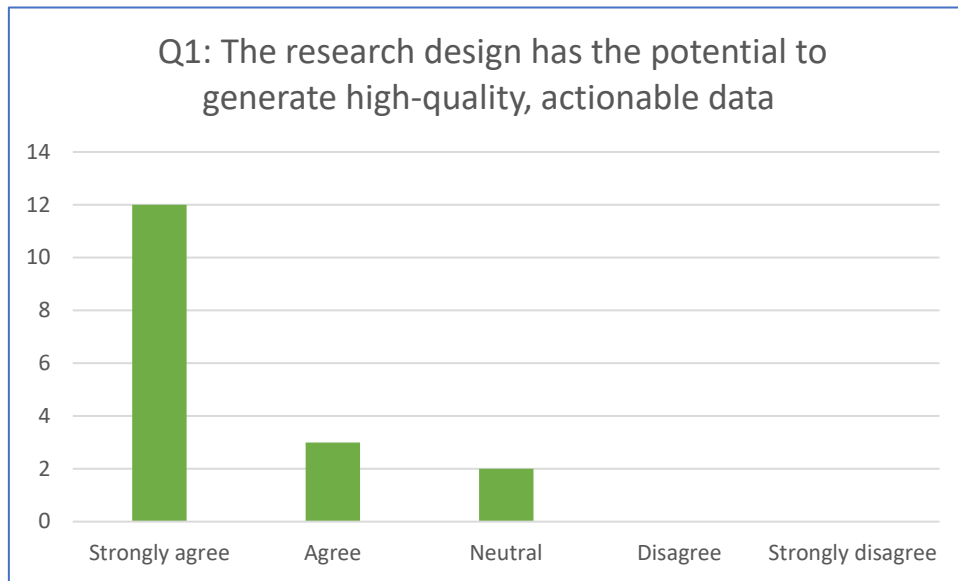
In addition to the three Likert scale questions, we collected name and contact information for each respondent and supplied an optional comment box.

On September 14, a reminder email went to non-respondents. The survey closed on September 17. Out of 26 organizations to receive the online link, 18 replied to the survey. However, one respondent did not complete all the questions, leaving us with a 65% response rate. Nine re-entry organizations and 8 libraries completely answered the questionnaire.

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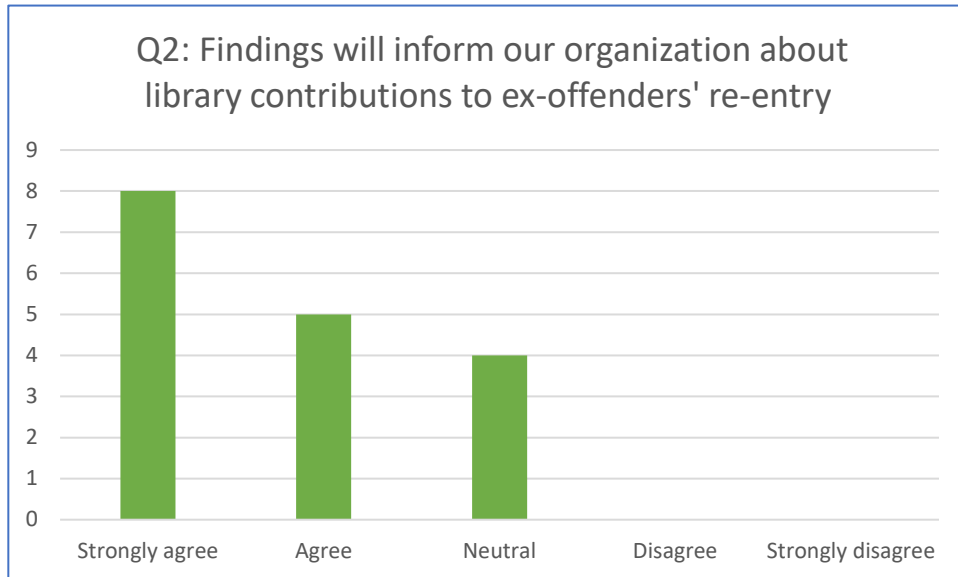
Seventeen people replied to question 1: “The research design has the potential to generate high-quality, actionable data about the contributions of prison libraries to the lives of ex-offenders.” Of those 17, a majority (15) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement and 2 were neutral. So, we see robust support and validation that the research should generate high-quality, useable data.



Answer choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	70.6%	12
Agree	17.6%	3
Neutral	11.8%	2
Disagree		
Strongly disagree		
	Total	17

Running crosstabs, revealed a very similar result among both the libraries and re-entry organizations. Six library respondents strongly agreed, 1 agreed and 1 was neutral regarding the statement. Re-entry organization respondents also had 6 strongly agree, 2 who agreed and 1 neutral.

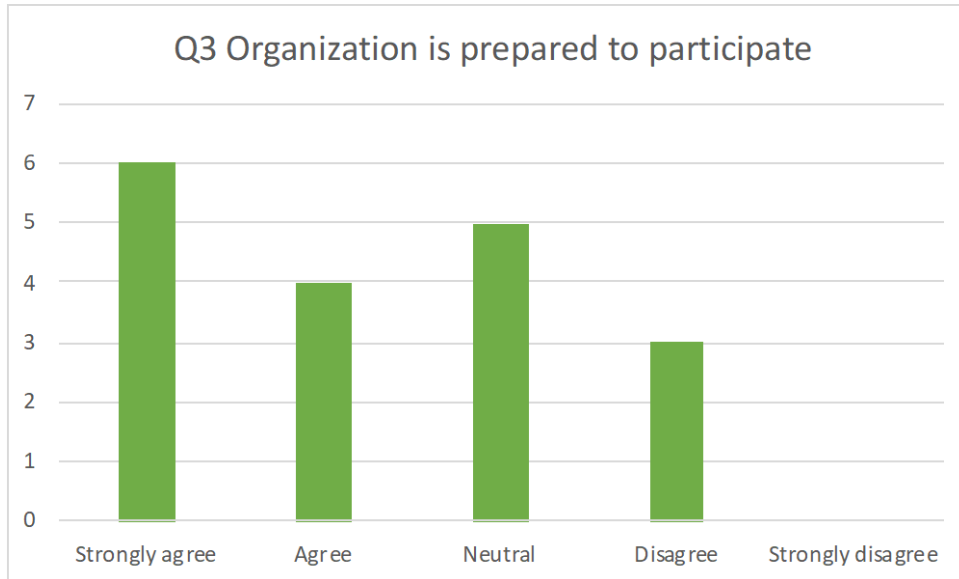
Seventeen people answered question 2: “The research design is sufficient for the findings to inform our organization about library contributions to ex-offenders’ pro-social skills development and re-entry preparation.” Of those 17 people, 13 either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Four were neutral. A re-entry organization partner answered neutral to both questions 1 and 2. He commented, “I must admit that I do not have a lot of experience, working or having much access to prison libraries.” This statement reveals some uncertainty about partner roles which may need to be addressed if the project is funded.



Answer choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	47.1%	8
Agree	29.4%	5
Neutral	23.5%	4
Disagree		
Strongly disagree		
	Total	17

Crosstab results for question 2 show slightly stronger support among re-entry organizations than libraries: 5 strongly agreed, 2 agreed and 2 were neutral. Libraries showed 3 strongly agreeing, 3 agreed and 2 were neutral.

We received 18 responses to question 3: “Our organization is prepared to participate in the envisioned Research project.” Unlike answers to the first two questions, responses were less enthusiastic regarding future participation in the study. Ten people either strongly agreed or agreed, so are ready to contribute. Five were neutral and 3 disagreed. Of the 3 who disagreed, a pre-entry partner left a comment, “due to the up-tic in violence, we are very busy. I truly believe in your efforts and if I were to commit, I would want to provide great attention and efforts to the cause. I am unable at this time.” It is impossible to ascertain the exact situation in which this person finds himself and his organization. However, the recent demonstrations and marches in big cities is a likely reason for the comment.



Answer choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	33.3%	6
Agree	22.2%	4
Neutral	27.8%	5
Disagree	16.7%	3
Strongly disagree		
	Total	18

The crosstab results reveal a bit more uncertainty among the re-entry organizations about their potential participation in the study. Four out of the 9 organizations strongly agreed. Meanwhile, 4 were neutral and 1 disagreed with participating. The previously mentioned comment about not feeling they have experience working with or having access to prison libraries may shine a light on how these organizations feel about participating in a future study. In addition, how someone foresees the future during this Covid year, may change once the study is funded.

Library results for question 3 showed 6 out of 9 interested in participating (2 strongly agree and 4 agreed). One participant was neutral about participating and 2 disagreed. Two of the libraries

with the highest possible number of ex-offenders on the partner spreadsheet either did not reply to the survey (Denver), or said they will not participate (Garfield).

PRISM Advisory Committee member email interview

On September 8, 2020, an email was sent to 20 members of the PRISM Advisory Committee asking them to provide anonymous feedback by answering this question:

Do you have recommendations for improving the research design should PRISM move from a planning project to a research project proposal?

On September 14, a reminder email was sent. Six committee members replied by the deadline. In addition to the comments from the committee, several partner organizations left remarks of substance that are included in this qualitative analysis.

Several members reported how well-crafted the research design was and their enthusiasm for the work completed by the group. “I was impressed again and again by the professionalism, dedication, and responsiveness of all the people from all over Colorado who participated in the planning meetings to shape the research plan. The overall quality of the plan is to the credit of the whole team of core project planners and the advisory group.” In addition, three members wrote to say they have no further recommendations.

Content analysis of committee responses and partner comments with recommendations revealed themes that included demographic factors; issues with communication going forward; how to keep organizations and libraries involved; and suggestions for additional library services already being offered to incarcerated populations.

Demographic factors

Three people offered recommendations regarding demographics of ex-offenders. One committee member wrote, “the plan calls for cross-tabulating focus group input, “to the extent possible,” according to demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age). For focus group input to be captured with that level of specificity, the interviewers will need a method for tracking the input according to those demographic characteristics. For example, some sort of coding capability could be included in the documentation the project team uses during the focus group sessions – if the final plan puts a high value on maximizing the ability to track the focus group answers by demographic factors.”

Another committee member mentions his concern for including people in the study whose time in prison amounted to different time periods. “It drastically alters opinion and perspective based on time in prison and what prison the inmate was at.”

Finally, a partner library staff member is concerned about identifying formerly incarcerated individuals. “We do not ask people whether or not they have been incarcerated.”

Communication

Two people made comments regarding communication if the project is funded. One library spoke of ex-offenders reentering the community who must deal with a number of issues (housing, jobs, families, etc.). It may be difficult to communicate with them after they leave prison. This person made no recommendation to 'fix' this issue, only saying "I hope I am wrong."

A committee member stated concerns about keeping organizations interested in the study and communicating with them as well as looking for input from a broader community. In particular, project staff should improve communication with public and community college libraries during the project. She recommends "incorporating more communication during the project, targeting a few different audiences as well as one-on-ones with key personnel." We all deal with hundreds of emails in our work week. Directors and other senior staff know about the project now, but will they be invested going forward? Improving communication would be an important step in the process.

Additional library services

A library partner felt that the study could benefit from adding other ways incarcerated populations receive library services and resources. In several library systems, "we deliver library services and resources to the incarcerated through the bookmobile as the centers we serve do not have a prison library."

Conclusion

Reviewing responses from both the partner surveys and comments from the advisory committee, the research design document clearly received strong validation that it is well-crafted and they anticipate the study would generate high-quality data to inform organizations about library contributions to ex-offenders'. Answers to questions 1 and 2 reveal a ringing endorsement for the value of such a study as written in the research design document.

What is less clear is how many organizations will still be able and interested in participating in the study if funded. A National Leadership grant proposal to IMLS would be written and submitted in the next two years. Keeping partners engaged with a long timeline would be a challenge during the best of times. Uncertainty during a pandemic makes it even more difficult. Organizations are dealing with loss of funding, staff, changes in how to provide service and many other issues.

With that said, the importance of moving forward with the study proposal was clearly supported by the results of the evaluation. Work accomplished by the advisory committee and RSL received much praise and encouragement. The committee and partner organizations foresee significant real-world results and impact for this timely research.