

Research Design for the PRISM Study

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

The overarching goal of the PRISM study is to identify and assess how prison libraries helped formerly incarcerated individuals to develop pro-social behaviors and information and learning skills that enabled them to stay occupied productively while incarcerated and to maximize their chances of successful re-entry into the community. Its purpose is essentially descriptive rather than causal or correlational, although variations in responses based on demographic and experiential differences will also be assessed.

Currently, the prison library sector has no extant efforts to encourage and facilitate outcome measurement. Public libraries have the Public Library Association's Project Outcome; school libraries have several decades of school library impact studies and, more recently, the American Association of School Librarians' C.L.A.S.S. (Causality: Librarians And Student Success) project; and academic libraries have the Association of College and Research Libraries' Project Outcome and the Association of Research Libraries' continually evolving suite of assessment tools: LibQual+, MINES, and LibValue. A study to assess the impact of prison libraries on their users is long overdue. Because Colorado champions offender rehabilitation over punishment, it is an excellent state to model a first-of-its-kind study that can be replicated in other states. Ultimately, the study resulting from this Planning project will benefit people during and after incarceration as well as other corrections stakeholders. Corrections decision-makers, administrators, and staff will gain quantitative and qualitative evidence – statistical analysis and best practices – about specific ways their libraries can contribute more effectively to rehabilitation. And, as a result, offenders will have more and better opportunities to learn and practice pro-social behaviors and the information and learning skills they need to succeed and contribute in free society.

Research Questions

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature on prison libraries—including related literature on pro-social behavior, information literacy, and re-entry—the following research questions were formulated to inform the design of survey and focus group interview questions and prompts.

1. Which prison library collections, services, and programs are associated with former library user perceptions of library contributions to their development of pro-social behavior and information and learning skills, and their preparation for re-entry to the community?
2. What motivated people who were incarcerated to use prison libraries, and what conditions encouraged or discouraged them to sustain library use during incarceration?
3. How and how much do people returning to the community perceive that prison libraries helped them develop pro-social behaviors and information and learning skills?
4. How and how much do people returning to the community perceive that prison libraries helped them address and ameliorate obstacles to mastering information and learning

*This project was made possible in part
by the Institute of Museum and Library
Services LG-97-18-0127-18.*

skills (e.g., language barriers, lower literacy, educational gaps, learning disabilities, mental health issues, social isolation)?

5. How and how much do people who have been incarcerated perceive that prison library use helped them occupy themselves constructively while incarcerated, prepared them for release, and reduced their risk of recidivism?
6. How and how much do people who were incarcerated perceive that prison libraries supported them in maintaining contact with family members, especially their children, and facilitated offender participation in family literacy activities?
7. How do former users of prison libraries believe those libraries could be improved?

Project Goals

This research project will achieve the following goals:

1. Identify outcomes of prison library use experienced by individuals recently released from Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) prisons. Of special interest are outcomes related to developing pro-social behaviors, and information literacy and learning skills, and preparing 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 be improved, either by increasing the variety of positive outcomes to which they contribute or by improving their effectiveness in contributing to current, known outcomes.

Sampling

Random sampling was rejected as a practical impossibility. Discussions were undertaken with CDOC personnel, which ultimately determined such sampling to be infeasible. Drawing a random sample of individuals recently released from CDOC facilities would have required access to a complete list of such individuals as well as up-to-date contact information for them. Access to such information was denied by CDOC based on a lack of available resources to fulfill such a request as well as the constraints of administrative regulations and privacy protection statutes. For these reasons, this study will employ purposeful sampling, a method consistent with the realities faced in attempting to survey and interview formerly incarcerated individuals in Colorado.

Purposeful sampling is most appropriate when one needs to maximize the impact of limited resources to identify and examine information-rich cases (Palinkas, et al., 2015). For this study, it is especially important to identify and select research subjects—both survey respondents and focus group interviewees—who have substantial knowledge and experience of incarceration in Colorado Department of Corrections facilities and thus had access to, and experience with, prison libraries. It is even more vital that these individuals be willing and able to participate, openly reflect, and articulate the thought processes, experiences, and perceptions that describe

their experience of incarceration and prison library use. Partner organizations—re-entry organizations as well as public and academic libraries—will be leveraged to assist in securing research subjects.

Initial purposeful sampling will rely on the communication channels of partner organizations recruited by Remerg, administrator of Remerg.com, Colorado’s clearinghouse for organizations and resources serving people released from prison or jail, and the Colorado Library Consortium (Clicweb.org), a statewide cooperative that serves libraries of all types. Estimated numbers of subjects we expect to reach through these channels are provided later in this document.

To maximize representativeness – and, if needed, to maximize the number of research subjects – snowball sampling will also be used. Potential survey respondents and focus group interviewees who are reached directly via these partner organizations will be asked to recommend others who can be invited to participate in the survey. This is expected to increase the potential respondent pool by adding recently released individuals who are not engaged with re-entry organizations or libraries, but may have used prison libraries. To the extent possible, demographic differences among all recently released individuals—specifically differences by gender, age group, and race/ethnicity—will be represented in the survey sample.

Available Data

The **Colorado Department of Corrections Annual Statistical Reports** profile those released each fiscal year by gender, race and ethnicity, and age group. Survey respondents will be asked to identify themselves in terms of gender (i.e., facility type), race and ethnicity, and age. The only purpose of those demographic survey items is to produce a comparative profile of survey respondents and those recently released. This comparative profile will indicate the extent to which the demographic mix of survey respondents represents the actual diversity of those recently released as indicated by CDOC statistical reports.

Survey

The primary data collection methodology of this study will be a survey of individuals recently released from Colorado Department of Corrections prisons. Based on their experience of using prison libraries, they will be asked to characterize their library use and to identify outcomes of it, informed by both their experience while incarcerated and since release. The design of the PRISM survey was based on iterative input from multiple meetings of the planning project staff and advisory committee, individual key informant interviews with 12 members of the PRISM Advisory Committee selected for their specific expertise relevant to prison libraries, and a comprehensive review of the literature on prison libraries.

The survey, which is appended to this document, poses questions in three substantive areas:

1. Frequency of prison library use or receiving library materials delivery; and factors that discouraged prison library use.
2. Types of library materials used and types of library and facility programs participated in by the respondent.
3. How using a prison library helped the respondent improve their pro-social behavior, information literacy skills, and preparation for re-entry into the community.

Additional questions at the beginning and end of the survey elicit demographic data—gender, race and ethnicity, and age—with which to assess the extent to which the respondents represent those recently released from Colorado prisons based on Colorado Department of Corrections data. The survey instrument is appended to this document.

Focus Group Interviews

The survey, which will elicit at a conceptual level much of what this study hopes to learn, will be supplemented by at least five focus group interviews, which will provide a more personal and experiential perspective on the issues under study. Separate interviews will be conducted with individuals who were incarcerated in facilities for men, women, and youth (a separate facility type in CDOC). Because the number of men’s prisons is so much larger, at least three focus group interviews will be conducted with individuals released from those facilities. Given the uncertain status of the global COVID-19 pandemic and for the convenience of participants, these focus group interviews may be conducted online.

Following are the focus group interview questions and prompts:

1. Why did you use your prison library?

Prompts:

- a) *Did you use the library for personal reasons, to participate in specific program activities, or both?*
- b) *Did someone else—another incarcerated person, a staff member, or a family member—encourage you to use the library?*

2. In what ways did your prison library serve you well?

Prompts:

- a) *What kept you returning to the library?*
- b) *Materials? Programs? Services? Contact with others? A specific kind of activity or information?*
- c) *What made you feel well-served by your library?*

3. In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?

Prompts:

- a) *What obstacles or challenges made it difficult for you to use the library as wished?*
- b) *How did those obstacles or challenges limit your library use?*
- c) *How did you cope with those limits?*

4. What could prison libraries do more of, do differently, or do better to serve people while they are incarcerated?

Prompts:

- a) *What do you wish it could have done, but did not?*
- b) *What do you wish it had been able to do better?*

5. What should be top priority for improving prison libraries?

Prompts:

- a) *If you were asked to identify 3 things that would improve how prison libraries serve their users, what would they be?*
- b) *Which of those should happen first?*

Data Analysis Plan

The following steps will be taken to analyze data obtained from the survey and focus group interviews.

- All answers to all questions will be reported by number and percentage of those responding.
- To the extent possible, all answers to all questions will be cross-tabulated with demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, and age).
- Responses to survey items 9 through 11 (reported outcomes of prison library use) will be cross-tabulated with responses to relevant responses to survey items 3 through 8 (frequency of library use and different types of materials, programs, and services used).
- To supplement the quantitative analysis of structured-response items, responses to the survey's final "Please tell us your library story" item will be coded thematically and their content analyzed to identify patterns and trends. Stories which best illustrate some of the survey's quantitative findings will be selected for use as sidebars in the study report.
- Information obtained via focus group interviews will be coded thematically and content analyzed for additional insights.

Time Frame, Activities & Timeline

A National Leadership Grant proposal for the PRISM study may be submitted to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) within the next two years. Assuming a September-to-September grant period, the following month-by-month timeline of activities is recommended:

- September — Recruit and convene advisory committee.
- October — Update review of literature.
- October — Review, and revise as needed, survey and focus group interview questions as well as plans for administering these two data collection activities.
- November — Re-establish contact with partner organizations (re-entry organizations and libraries) to confirm their continuing commitment to study participation and to update, if necessary, information on their contact people.
- November — With advisory committee and partner input, formulate a plan for promoting the study that identifies a variety of means that will be used to create awareness of the study among individuals recently released from Colorado Department of Corrections prisons before they are asked to respond to a survey and/or participate in a focus group interview.
- January — Launch promotional campaign to create awareness of the study.
- February — Administer the survey via e-mails and other contacts by partner organizations as well as a link on the study website.
- February–March — Continue to promote awareness of the study, and monitor and assess the survey response rate, throughout the period the survey is open.

- March — Make targeted efforts to improve the response rate if insufficient overall or for any demographic groups (gender, race/ethnicity, age).
- April — Tabulate overall survey responses and create one or more infographics summarizing those responses.
- May–June — Conduct more in-depth analyses as outlined above in the data analysis plan.
- July–August — Based on volunteers, survey respondent stories, and individuals recruited by partner organizations, organize five focus group interviews to collect qualitative data.
- July–September — Produce study report, an article manuscript to be submitted for publication in the library or corrections literature, and infographic(s) summarizing focus group interview findings.

Potential Partner Libraries & Re-Entry Organizations & Their Estimated Reach

In June 2020, Remerg and CLiC made email appeals to their primary clientele, re-entry organizations and public libraries, respectively. The purpose of the appeals was to estimate the number of research subjects the project would likely be able to reach for participation in the study. In July, further appeals were made by the Colorado State Library.

At this writing, the following Colorado re-entry organizations have volunteered to participate in the PRISM study. (Counties served and estimated numbers of potential survey respondents appear in parentheses.)

- Christlife Ministries (El Paso, Pueblo, 50+)
- Connections for Life (Denver metro, 25-49)
- Doing His Time Prison Ministries (Jefferson, 50+)
- Homeward Alliance Re-Entry Program (Larimer, 20)
- K Project Freedom (Denver metro, 20)
- Life-Line (Denver metro, 50+)
- No More Locked Doors (Denver metro, 50+)
- Red Rocks Community College’s Gateway Program (Jefferson, 25-49)
- Southeast Health Group (25-49)
- The Empowerment Program (50+)
- The Piñon Project Family Resource Center (Crowley, Kiowa, Otero, Bent, Prowers, Baca, 30)
- The Re-entry Initiative (Boulder, Denver metro, 10-24)

The following Colorado public and academic libraries have also volunteered (and estimated their reach as follows).

- Burlington Public Library (don’t know)
- Denver Public Library (50+)
- Dolores County Public Library (don’t know)
- Durango Public Library (don’t know)
- Garfield County Library (50+)
- J. C. Fremont Library District (1-4)
- Jefferson County Public Library (10-24)

- Johnson & Wales University Library (don't know)
- Lafayette Public Library (don't know)
- Lake County Public Library (don't know)
- Montrose Public Library (don't know)
- Ouray Public Library (1-4)
- Pikes Peak Library District (don't know)
- West Custer County Library District (1-4)

Efforts to recruit additional partners to help with disseminating the survey as well as recruiting focus group participants are continuing. Based on these data alone, however, the estimated number of individuals whom partners believe they can invite to participate in the survey ranges from 526 to 659. These figures were arrived at by assigning the “don't know” responses to the “1-4” category. Given that 7 major partners expect to reach at least 50 potential survey respondents, the range of potential survey respondents is a very conservative estimate. To maximize the odds of invitees responding to the survey, respondents will be entered in an anonymous drawing for multiple cash prizes.