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Guidelines for library services  
to prisoners

3rd Edition

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After examining the many responses, the authors were even more convinced about the need for this new and revised prison library guidelines publication.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose

The objective of this document is to provide a tool for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of library services to prisoners. The document is intended to serve as a model guide for the development of national guidelines for prison libraries. It can be easily adapted to reflect local circumstances. At the same time, these international guidelines reflect an acceptable level of library service, which could be achieved in most countries where national and local government policies support the existence of prison libraries. The guidelines represent a tool for planning new libraries and for evaluation of existing libraries. In the absence of any local guidelines or standards, these guidelines can be used.

In addition to being a practical tool for the establishment, operation, and assessment of prison libraries, these guidelines shall serve as a general statement of principle for the fundamental right of prisoners to read, learn, and access information. The guidelines are aimed at librarians, library administrators, prison authorities, legislative and administrative branches of government, and other agencies/authorities that are responsible for administering and funding prison libraries.

The guidelines apply to prisons and other incarceration facilities with a population of 50 or more.

## Background

IFLA's Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons (LSDP) Section provides leadership to libraries, associations, and government agencies for the development of specialized services to those groups within the community who are unable to make use of conventional library services. These groups include persons in hospitals and prisons, the elderly in nursing homes and care facilities, the house-bound, the deaf, the physically and developmentally disabled and those with reading difficulties.

In accordance with this mission, the members of the LSDP Standing Committee have over the last decade focused much of their work on the development of guidelines for the provision of library services to the various population groups within the Section's sphere of professional concern. These guidelines have been published in IFLA's Professional Reports series and have been regularly updated and revised, in order to reflect current research and practice, as well as the growing use of library and information technology. This publication is the third edition of the ***Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners***.

The LSDP Standing Committee, recognizing the need for library and information services to the growing number of persons serving time in prisons around the world, in 1985 established a prison libraries working group. Over the next five years, the working group sponsored several conference programs, workshops, satellite meetings, and a survey, to heighten the awareness of prison library services and to gather information which would serve as a foundation for the development of a

guidelines publication. The first edition of ***Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners***, edited by Frances E. Kaiser, was published in 1992. This document focused on general principles and practices. The publication was translated into Spanish in 1993. The second edition of the guidelines was published in 1995, also edited by Frances E. Kaiser, and included more specific information on levels of service, size of collections, staffing, funding, evaluation, and marketing methods. The German translation was published the same year.

In 2001, the LSDP Standing Committee again took a look at how prison library services had grown, not only in the Western and European countries, but also in several developing nations and the countries which were formerly part of or allied with the Soviet Union. The LSDP Standing Committee also recognized the rapid and profound changes made on all types of libraries by the introduction of information technology and automation systems. A small working group was established to 1) examine how public library systems had expanded their outreach services to include institutionalized persons (including prisoners), 2) conduct an international literature search about the current status of prison libraries, and 3) gather information on existing national standards/guidelines and service delivery methods. The ultimate objective was to use this information to develop a new edition of the ***Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*** that would be useful well into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The survey findings have been incorporated into the current edition.

### **Philosophy and Assumptions**

As modern societies gradually adopt a more humane and enlightened practice of criminal justice and incarceration in accordance with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they shift their focus from punishment to education, rehabilitation, and constructive use of time. The prison library then becomes an important part of the entire prison environment in its support for educational, recreational, and rehabilitative programs. The prison library also provides a level of "normalcy" in a highly regulated environment as a place where individuals are free to make their own choices and engage in self-directed pursuits. The library presents a window to the outside world and can provide much useful information for those preparing for release to the outside world.

An incarcerated person has not relinquished the right to learn and to access information, and the prison library should offer materials and services comparable to community libraries in the "free" world. Restrictions on the access to library materials and information should be imposed only when such access is known to present a danger to prison security.

Prison libraries should emulate the public library model, while at the same time providing resources for prison education and rehabilitation programs, as well as other prison specific requirements, e.g., legal collections. Special attention should be given to meeting the needs of multicultural and multilingual users.

The prison library should provide the offenders with the opportunity to develop literacy skills, pursue personal and cultural interests, as well as life-long learning. The library should provide resources for all these activities.

Several internationally endorsed documents serve as foundations for the establishment and support of library services to prisoners:

1. Rule 40 of the *United Nations Standard Minimal Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (1955) reads: "Every institution shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it."
2. The *Charter for the Reader* (1994) developed by the International Book Committee and the International Publishers Associations and published by UNESCO, states that "reading is a universal right."
3. IFLA/UNESCO *Public Library Manifesto* (1995) calls for public libraries to serve prisoners.
4. The *Education in Prison* report, endorsed by the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 1990) includes a chapter on the prison library. It recommends that the prison library should function with the same professional standards as libraries in the community; should be managed by a professional librarian, should meet the interests and needs of a culturally diverse population; should provide open access for prisoners; and should provide a range of literacy and reading related activities.

In most countries around the world, the majority of individuals who make up the prison and jail populations have limited education and life skills and do not come from a background where reading was a frequent or popular pursuit. Indeed, a significant number of prisoners have been found to have low literacy and insufficient employability skills. Few have been regular users of public or academic libraries during their lives on the "outside."

What the incarcerated person reads depends on the quality and relevance of the library collection. With a qualified staff, a collection of materials that meets the education, recreation, and rehabilitation needs of the prisoners, as well as an inviting physical space, the prison library can be an important part of prison life and offender programs. The library also represents an important "lifeline" to the outside world. It can be an effective management tool for the prison administration by reducing idleness and encouraging constructive use of time. Lastly, the prison library can be the vital information resource that makes the difference of whether or not a newly released ex-offender fails or succeeds on the outside.

# GUIDELINES

## 1. Scope

- 1.1 These guidelines are applicable to all facilities where individuals are held in incarceration. These facilities may be referred to as prisons, jails, remand centers, detention centers, forensic hospitals, or other types of institutions administered by the prison authorities. The guidelines are valid for both adult and juvenile facilities.

## 2. Administration

- 2.1 Written policies for the provision of library services should be developed by national and/or local prison authorities. These policies should clearly state the mission and goals, as well as the funding sources and administrative responsibilities for the library services. The policies should be based on relevant library laws and regulations and shall be regularly reviewed and updated.
- 2.2 The prison library policies should serve as the foundation for the development of local library procedures, addressing such areas as daily operations and library hours, materials selection, cataloging/processing, donations, circulation and access to materials, inventory and weeding, copyright compliance, collection of library data, staffing, budgeting, reader services, policy review, and use of computers/information technology.
- 2.3 Since the administrative and funding authority for prison libraries varies among countries (national justice ministry, county or municipal government, public library or library system, ministry of culture or education, etc.) and in some cases, several government entities share this authority/responsibility, it is important to have a legal agreement/contract in place which outlines the contributions of each party and the levels of service provided.
- 2.4 It is highly recommended that the library develop and implement a long-range plan (3-5 years). The plan should be based on a thorough needs evaluation of the user population. It shall include a mission statement and a description of the library's main role(s) within the institution (e.g., resource for recreational reading, center for education program support, resource for self-study and life-long learning, cultural center, career & job information center, legal materials center). Further, the plan should include goals, measurable objectives, strategies to complete objectives, and evaluation methods. The plan shall be endorsed by the prison administration.
- 2.5 It is useful to conduct a performance evaluation of the library program every 3-5 years to ensure compliance with policies and procedures and to measure the effectiveness of services.



### 3. Access

- 3.1 Access to a library and its services should be available to all prisoners, regardless of their security classification and location within the prison. Access to library services should be restricted only for documented infringement of library rules.
- 3.2 Prisoners with unrestricted movement within the facility should be able to visit the library every week for periods sufficiently long to select and check out materials, ask reference questions, order interlibrary loan items, read materials that do not circulate, and participate in cultural activities organized by the library.
- 3.3 Library hours should be coordinated with education programs and work assignments in order to minimize schedule conflicts.
- 3.4 Where prisoners are allowed to leave the facility for work or study, arrangements should be made for them to use the local public or academic library.
- 3.5 Prisoners in segregated status (hospital wards, protective custody, punishment units, etc.) should have access to a catalog (in print or electronic format) of the prison library collection and be permitted to request materials from the main collection and through interlibrary loan.
- 3.6 A deposit collection of at least one hundred (100) popular and current books or two (2) books per prisoner (whichever is greater) should be available on each restricted housing unit. This collection shall be changed at least once per month. Each prisoner should be able to browse and select at least two (2) titles per week from the deposit collection.
- 3.7 Recognizing the impossibility of meeting all reading and information needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse population in-house, the prison library should participate in a regional or national interlibrary loan system.
- 3.8 The prison library should comply with existing accessibility laws and codes that prescribe how library users with physical or cognitive disabilities are served. Such requirements may relate to the physical access to the library building/space, as well as access to library materials and information in alternative, non-print format, adaptive equipment, and special outreach services and accommodations. (For specific recommendations, see **Access to libraries for persons with disabilities – Checklist**, by Birgitta Irvall and Gyda Skat Nielsen. IFLA Professional Report No. 89, 2005. ISBN: 90-77897-04). <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s9/nd1/iflapr-89e.pdf>

### 4. Physical Facility & Equipment

- 4.1 In modern prison facilities, the physical space occupied by the library should be designed specifically for library use, work flow, and functionality. In older

facilities, remodeling may be necessary for the library to function efficiently. Specialists in library design should be consulted during the planning process. The effectiveness and success of library services are to a large extent related to a welcoming and comfortable physical environment.

- 4.2 The library should be situated at a central location within the prison complex, preferably within or near the education department. The library should be easy to reach for the largest number of prisoners and be accessible for persons with physical disabilities.
- 4.3 The library should be a separate and lockable area. The design should include the following:
  - functional lighting for reading, computer use, and other library specific functions
  - acoustical treatment for walls, floor, and ceiling
  - climate control (heating, cooling, ventilation)
  - load bearing capabilities sufficient for book stacks
  - electrical and data outlets sufficient to accommodate the required technical and electronic equipment
  - visual control of the entire library space
  - lockable storage space
  - telephone to the outside
  - electronic emergency communication system
- 4.4 The library floor space shall be large enough to accommodate user activities, staff functions, and materials storage & display, including:
  - reference station with counter and storage cabinets
  - reference desk
  - library office
  - staff workroom for technical processing, computer equipment, shelves, cupboards, book carts, and tables
  - shelving for library materials (books, magazines, newspapers, audiovisual materials)
  - display area for books and promotional materials
  - reading tables and chairs
  - listening area
  - computers for patron use
  - photocopier
  - space for group activities.
- 4.5 The patron seating/study area should be large enough to accommodate at a minimum 5% of the prison population or the maximum number of inmates allowed in the library. Space for seating, including tables and aisles, shall be allocated at 2.5 square meters per seat.
- 4.6 The shelving area should be 15 square meters per 1000 volumes.

- 4.7 The staff work area should be 9 square meters per person.
- 4.8 The library office should be a minimum of 9 square meters.
- 4.9 Five percent (5%) of the total library space should be allocated as “special use” space for certain library furnishings and equipment (computerized or card catalog station, dictionary and atlas stand, patron computers, typewriters, photocopier, art or media display).
- 4.10 Furniture and equipment should be selected for its effectiveness, comfort, attractiveness, ease of maintenance, and durability. Furniture and equipment shall be arranged in configurations that comply with security regulations. Modular furniture pieces are recommended for flexibility, as the library grows and needs change.

## **5. Information Technology**

- 5.1 The prison library should make use of current information technology to the extent possible without compromising prison security.
- 5.2 The library should implement an automated circulation and catalog system which uses a bibliographic database in international standardized format (MARC 21).
- 5.3 Access for patrons to computers with multimedia software is highly recommended for informational, educational, and recreational pursuits.
- 5.4 Library staff shall have access to the Internet and to email, in order to answer information requests, search web based library catalogs, communicate with professional colleagues and vendors, take distance learning classes, and participate in interlibrary loan.
- 5.5 Where prison network security permits, prisoners shall be given supervised Internet access for education and treatment purposes, as well as pre-release planning.

## **6. Staff**

- 6.1 All prison libraries, regardless of size, should be supervised/managed by a professional librarian with the necessary qualifications and skills obtained through a university degree in library information science or equivalent library school diploma.
- 6.2 All prisons with a population above 500 should have a fulltime professional librarian on site. Prisons with a population above 1000 should employ two (2) fulltime librarians. Smaller prisons may reduce the number of hours the library is staffed by a professional librarian as follows:

Institution population

Professional librarian hours

0 - 300  
301 - 499

24  
30

6.3 Additional staff should be employed according to the needs of the institution. The total number staff will vary according to the size of the prison population and the following factors:

- the number of open library hours
- the size, direct accessibility, and configuration of the library
- the number of patrons allowed in the library at any one time
- the amount of programming in the library
- the number of satellite libraries or delivery sites
- the number and size of restricted access units
- the level of automation
- the movement restrictions within the prison complex
- the number and types of education and rehabilitation programs available

6.4 All library staff should possess the necessary professional and technical qualifications to provide direct user services and operational support.

6.5 Library staff should knowledgeable of the many and complex information needs of incarcerated persons and should possess the necessary human and interpersonal skills to work effectively in a prison environment.

6.7 Library staff may be employed by the prison authority, a public library system, an academic library, or a cultural institution.

6.8 Salaries and employment benefits for prison library staff should be comparable to those of public library employees with similar qualifications and responsibilities or those paid by the employer to similar positions.

6.9 Library staff should be given opportunities to participate in professional organizations and to attend professional development and continuing education programs.

6.10 Library staff should extend services to all inmates without discrimination and should respect the privacy of library users.

6.11 The prison may employ inmate workers in the library. These persons should be selected according to their skills, experience, and familiarity with library operations and processes.

6.12 Community volunteers may also be employed in the library. These persons should not be employed in lieu of regular paid staff but should provide extra support and special programs, as necessary.

6.13 Both inmate workers and community volunteers should be provided with a broad orientation program and on-the-job training.

## 7. Budget

- 7.1 The agency/authority responsible for the prison library should ensure that the library is funded as a separate line item and receives annual allocations to cover salaries, library materials, subscriptions, equipment, IT, supplies, contractual services, interlibrary delivery, network/consortia memberships, staff training, and database fees.
- 7.2 The long-range library plan (see 2.4) should serve as the basis for the annual budget.
- 7.3 The library budget should be developed and administered by the chief librarian.
- 7.4 The library staff should develop an annual activity report that details expenditures, library activity statistics, and program outcomes.
- 7.5 The annual library materials budget should be allocated by using one of the two following formulas:

- A. For prisons with populations **above** 500, the average price (in local currency) of one (1) general hardback book will serve as the basis to calculate the minimum budget for an established library:

The average non-fiction hardback book price x 70% of the inmate population plus 10% for loss (e.g., 500 inmates x 70% x 32.00 euros = 11,200 euros + 1,120 euros (10% of \$11,200) = \$12,320 euros. This formula does not imply the library will purchase only hardback books, but represents a simple tool for calculating the total budget for all types of library materials. The materials budget will increase as the book price increases.

OR

- B. For prisons with populations **below** 500, the annual minimum budget should be sufficient to replace 10% of the collection
- 7.6 The startup materials budget for new libraries should be sufficient to establish at least 50% of a full-service collection. Additional funds beyond the regular budget should then be allocated each year for up to four (4) consecutive years, allowing the materials collection to reach full size within five (5) years.

## 8. Library Materials

- 8.1 The library collection should include materials in print and other formats to meet the informational, educational, cultural, recreational, and rehabilitative needs of the prison population. Included should be a wide variety of current print and non-print materials similar to those found in a public or school library.

- 8.2 The library collection should be regularly enhanced with new acquisitions selected by the professional librarians. The planned acquisitions may be augmented by donations, if the donated titles meet the needs of the library.
- 8.3 Interlibrary loans should be used to complement the library collection and not as an alternative to planned collection development.
- 8.4 The library collection should be managed and maintained according to professional standards and should be effectively displayed and actively promoted.
- 8.5 Materials should be selected according to a collection management policy/plan that is based on the demographic composition of the prison population. The collection management policy/plan should state clearly that no censorship will be applied in the selection of materials, except in such circumstances where an individual title/item is known to cause a threat to prison security. The policy/plan shall address:
- the ethnic/cultural composition, ages, reading levels, educational backgrounds, and languages of the prison population
  - the need for materials helpful in preparing prisoners for re-entry into the community, including information on community resources and support groups, job and housing opportunities, education, and job training options
  - the need for reference and other materials supporting programs offered by the institution (drug & alcohol treatment, anger management, parenting, literacy tutoring, art & music, etc.)
  - a process for recommending titles and a process for handling requests to remove titles from the collection
  - procedures for weeding outdated and unnecessary materials from the collection
  - a process for handling donations
- 8.6 Selection criteria should include, but not be limited to:
- suitability of subject and style for intended audience
  - appeal to the interests and needs of the prisoners
  - attention of critics, reviewers, and the public
  - artistic, social, scientific, or cultural significance
  - factual accuracy
  - suitability of format for library use
  - relevance to existing library holdings and subject coverage
  - costs
- 8.7 The library should strive to develop a “balanced” collection that represents a broad range of ideas and viewpoints. The criteria under 8.6 should not be used to exclude particular materials that may be unpopular with certain population groups.

- 8.8 Donated materials should be subject to the same selection criteria as purchased materials.
- 8.9 The library collection should include the following types of materials (in the native language and other languages, as needed):
- general reference titles
  - fiction, including a broad range of genres (romance, mystery, crime, science fiction, fantasy, horror, etc.)
  - biographies
  - non-fiction, covering the standard Dewey subject areas, with heavy emphasis on self-help, life skills, and personal relationships
  - legal materials (to meet informational needs as well as constitutional or court mandated requirements)
  - poetry (very popular in prisons)
  - comics and graphic novels (for both beginning readers and advanced enthusiasts)
  - self-study materials (to support distance learning/correspondence classes and life-long learning)
  - easy-to-read materials (for patrons with reading problems and non-native language speakers)
  - large-print books (for persons with visual problems)
  - audiobooks (for all patrons and those with visual and reading problems)
  - audio and visual materials, multimedia and computer software (where equipment is available)
  - community information (brochures, directories, handbooks, etc. for pre-release planning and job search)
  - literacy & numeracy materials (for improving reading, writing, and math skills)
  - puzzles, games (for education and entertainment)
  - magazines (general interest & subject specific – for all patrons)
  - newspapers (for all prisoners – to keep informed of world and local affairs and stay in touch with home community)
- 8.10 Sufficient materials in alternative formats should be available to meet the needs of prisoners who cannot use conventional print publications (including persons with physical or cognitive disabilities, and those with reading and learning disabilities). These materials may be supplemented through interlibrary loan services.
- 8.11 The number of materials that constitutes a minimally “adequate” collection will vary according to many factors, including the size of the prison population, the custody level(s), the number of satellite collections, the average length of stay, work and education programs available, the number of library visits per week, and the extent of programs/activities offered in the library. While taking these factors into account, a general guideline is for a full-service library to have **a minimum** of the following materials (items in heavy demand shall be available in multiple copies):

**BOOKS:** A collection of 2000 titles or ten (10) titles per inmate, whichever is greater

**MAGAZINES:** A minimum collection of 20 titles or one subscription per twenty (20) inmates, whichever is greater

**NEWSPAPERS:** Local, national, and foreign newspapers – the number to be decided by the geographical areas/countries represented by the prison population

**AUDIO AND VISUAL MATERIALS, MULTIMEDIA AND COMPUTER SOFTWARE:**

Sufficient amount to meet basic needs and support ongoing prison programs. Additional materials as needed through ILL, regional consortia, or national collections

8.12 All library materials should be classified and cataloged according to national and/or international standards. If access to bibliographic databases is available, existing cataloging data should be obtained from such sources, eliminating the need for in-house cataloging.

8.13 Library materials should be kept in good repair, should be labeled with call numbers and kept organized for open and easy access.

8.14 An automated catalog and circulation system is highly recommended, in order to increase search capabilities, manage the collection, and account for its use.

**9. Services and Programs**

9.1 The extent and level of library services to the inmates should be based on a demographic profile of the prison population and the library long-range plan (see 2.4). User services should include, but not be limited to:

- reference and information service through in-house materials and, where feasible, Internet resources – to meet patrons’ needs for facts and data
- readers advisory service – to recommend to patrons items of interest and at appropriate reading levels
- regular library orientation and instruction in the use of the library
- interlibrary loan – to access other library collections through participation in regional and state systems, networks, or other cooperative relationships
- provision of special materials for patrons with disabilities (e.g., materials from the national library for the blind, disability support groups, etc.)

9.2 The library should provide services to inmates in restricted status comparable to those provided to the general population (see also 3.4 and 3.5).

9.3 The library should organize and support a variety of activities and programs that promote reading, literacy, and cultural pursuits. Such programs provide



the opportunity for creative use of time and improved quality of life. They also foster social skills and enhanced self esteem. Prison authorities should be aware that inmates who are engaged in productive pursuits are less likely to cause problems and disturbances. Examples of interesting and relevant library programs are:

- author readings
- book clubs & discussions
- literary and “fact” contests that use library resources
- creative writing workshops
- music programs
- art workshops & displays
- literacy tutoring
- spelling contests
- holiday & cultural celebrations
- job fairs

Not all of these activities may be appropriate for all types of prisons. Library sponsored events shall be compatible with the overall mission of the prison and shall be approved by the administration.

## **10. Communication and Marketing**

- 10.1 The prison library staff should maintain open two-way communication with library users and shall welcome suggestion. Regular user satisfaction surveys are recommended. The credibility of the library will be greatly enhanced if patron suggestions are implemented in a timely manner.
- 10.2 Extra efforts should be made to communicate with speakers of foreign languages, since these prisoners may have a difficult time participating in education and prison programs.
- 10.3 The library staff should reach out to other prison departments by offering support and resources. Library staff can enhance the importance of the library in the eyes of the administration by participating in cross-disciplinary programs, advisory committees, and special projects. Education and treatment staff should be encouraged to bring classes and inmate groups to the library.
- 10.4 It is recommended to have a prison library advisory committee with representation from a broad spectrum of prison departments, as well as inmate groups. The committee members can act as advocates for the library and can be very helpful in providing feedback to the library staff.
- 10.5 Prison librarians often feel isolated in their jobs and deprived of regular contact with their professional colleagues on the “outside.” This isolation can be broken by becoming part of a professional “network,” participating in Internet discussion groups, subscribing to newsletters, attending professional

conferences and workshops, contributing to the professional literature, and lecturing to library school students.

- 10.6 Library staff can promote the use of the library and its materials in many ways. Effective ways of bringing people to the library may include the publication and wide distribution of a colorful library brochure and having library staff participate in orientation for new prisoners.
- 10.7 In addition to sponsoring activities in the library (see 9.3), staff and inmate library workers can prepare:
- subject bibliographies
  - lists of new acquisitions
  - pathfinders and bookmarks
  - book and art displays
- 10.8 The library can also increase the number of library visits by serving as a central distribution center for community social service publications and acting as a referral center to outside support organizations.

## GLOSSARY

This document uses the following terms and phrases as defined and in the context described:

**Access:** Freedom and ability to obtain and make use of information, library materials & services.

**Agency:** Public or private institution/system providing library services to people in legal custody.

**Large-print books/publications:** Materials printed in 14-point or larger type.

**Prison:** Any institution/facility where people are held in custody, incarceration, or detention. Also referred to as penitentiary, penal institution, jail, or correctional institution.

**Prison authority:** National or local government department administering prison facilities.

**Segregation/segregated status:** Physical separation of inmates for the protection of staff and other inmates, institution security, or for punishment.

**Satellite library:** Subsidiary library or branch within the prison complex, supervised by staff of the main library. Smaller than the main library and often located in restricted areas (e.g. cellblock, segregation, school, hospital).

**User:** An individual who used the library. Also referred to as patron.



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