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1-27-2016

# Information Needs and the Enhancement of the Psychological Wellbeing of Nigerian Prison Inmates

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Emasealu, Helen U. Dr. (Mrs). and Popoola, S.O., "Information Needs and the Enhancement of the Psychological Wellbeing of Nigerian Prison Inmates" (2016). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 1365.  
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**INFORMATION NEEDS AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL  
WELLBEING OF NIGERIAN PRISON INMATES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In every society, deviant behaviour is inevitable and, as a result of its adverse consequences, ought to be taken seriously. Nations have formulated rules and regulations which constitute the penal policies towards the administration and dispensation of criminal justice in the effort to punish as well as reform criminal-minded individuals. The provision of library information resources to cater for the information needs of prison inmates as reformatory tool for their psychological well-being during incarceration has not been given adequate attention in Nigeria prison system. A survey study with structured questionnaire was used to collect data on the sampled 600 prison inmates, out of which 357 inmates responded. The population of the study comprised prisons with two (2) functional libraries. These two (2) prison libraries were chosen through purposive sampling from the total number of all the convict inmates. Prison inmates were classified based on the type of offence committed and duration of prison term. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics of, correlation and multiple regression analyses. The study revealed that there was significant multiple correlation among information needs, and psychological well-being of the inmates ( $R=0.665, p < 0.05$ ). This study observed that information needs of prison inmates are diverse. The study concluded that government must fund the provision of adequate information resources and that the services of professional librarians must be engaged to source for relevant information resources in order to satisfy the information needs of prison inmates in Nigeria.

**Key Words:** Prison Libraries, Nigerian Prisons, Psychological Well-being.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, prisons are essentially meant to be reformatory and not merely for punishment and maltreatment. But in Nigeria as in so many other developing countries, such as Sri Lanka, India, Madagascar, Nicaragua, Botswana, Kenya and the Gambia just to mention a few, the prison experiences among inmates is not just punitive but tortuous. Prisoners, rather than being meaningfully engaged in reformation and reintegration programmes, are exposed to all forms of abuse and this trend has been condemned (Alemika and Alemika, 1987). These abuses meted out on inmates often range from isolation, brutality, violence, stress, physical and psychological victimization, harassment, overcrowding and riots among other forms of abuse. Amnesty International (2008) has observed that Nigerian prisons are noted for accommodating prisoners kept in their custody in overcrowded environments. The environment in which Nigerian prison inmates are quartered has equally been criticized and described as dehumanizing as it occasions personality problems and such health cases as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, skin infections and other transmittable diseases (Bashir, 2003; Orakwe, 2001; Jarma, 2003). Indeed, the general conditions of prisons and the welfare treatment given to inmates can go a long way in determining the extent to which reformation and rehabilitation programmes fare in any context.

The term information refers to facts or several arrays of ideas transferred and received through communication and which involves the process of informing in the bid to acquire knowledge has continued to play a dominant and essential role in human history and through civilizations. Faibisoff and Ely (1974) define information as symbol or a set of symbols which has the potential for meaning. Birger Holland (2011) has developed the maxim on information that “He who is not informed is deformed”. Information, therefore, is a term which entails the knowledge derived from study, experience or instruction. It is a veritable tool for the transformation of man and society towards attaining life goals. This is so because once it is gotten, the individual is able to come to terms with his or her environment. Thus, the acquisition of information empowers individuals to plan and make projections towards the realization of one’s objectives in life. It is in this vein that Hjørland (2011) has observed that:

What users believe they need represents their subjective understanding of their need. This subjective understanding is reflected in their information-seeking behavior. Even if this behavior may be studied objectively it is still not useful criteria for what is needed. What is needed is something that is able to solve the problem behind the user’s behavior. When we go to real life

problems, there are usually different opinions about how they should be understood and how they should be addressed, including different opinions about what information is relevant to solve the problem.

The implication of the above statement is that information is a concept, pregnant with diverse meanings and interpretations depending on what the user needs at a particular point in time. Thus, in as much as prison inmates are kept in a secluded place for a period of time, depending on the crime committed, it is important and a matter of necessity, to cater for their information needs and by providing access to such materials. Such information will help in their transformation and reformation thus; upon re-entry into society become better behaved citizens. In modern times, the essence of a prison is to institute change in the prisoner/inmate so that he or she can become a responsible and law abiding citizen who can contribute meaningfully to the human capacity development and societal growth when the jail term has eventually been served (Campbell 2006). It is access to vital and relevant information that can occasion such desired attitudinal change.

Indeed, in modern societies, the term information is understood to be a key factor of any production endeavour. Man, first and foremost, needs information on how to acquire all the other traditional “factors of production” which for the economist include capital, land, labour and man. This, therefore, presupposes that information is essential for the growth and developmental activities of individuals, groups, organizations and societies. It is a weapon that is vital for the survival of most of all human daily transactions in the process of decision making. The argument, therefore, that a person imprisoned for committing a crime should not be accorded the right to information is untenable because denying prisoners such right to information cannot guarantee and sustain inmates’ life and wellness, reformation and reintegration goals while in prison.

Taylor (1962) defined information needs as a process that entails “asking questions” of how an inquirer obtains answers from an information system, by performing such processes consciously or unconsciously. The amount of information available to man at any given point in time may be inadequate even though there is abundance of information. The right information, therefore, must be made available on time, accessible at the right location and in the most appropriate format (Faibisoff and Ely, 1974). Prison inmates need information to address their problems on a daily bases just like free citizens in the outside world, particularly as prisoners find themselves in a closed world once shut off in the prison. From time immemorial, man has continuously been engaged in the quest to acquire knowledge to deal with the mystery of the unknown. Information

brings forth enlightenment as it is capable of revealing that which lies beneath the surface. The implication is that information is crucial to human existence for without information man will continue to grope in ignorance and darkness. Against this backdrop, Platek (1998) has reasoned that incarcerated criminals are still members of society and, as a consequence, there is the need to continuously make provision for their information needs. As Platek puts it:

Prisoners should be allowed to keep most of the rights enjoyed by free citizens and granting them rights specific to their incarcerated status are expressions of basic tenets of humanitarianism and social solidarity. Because this approach defends human dignity, it helps to prevent crime and improve public safety. Low self-esteem or lack of self-respect often leads a person to be indifferent to the right or dignity of others, and constitute one cause of deviant and criminal behavior.

The thrust of Platek's submission is simply that despite their status as incarcerated persons, prison inmates should possess the fundamental human right to information. This right is particularly guaranteed through the provision of library information materials that should cater for the specific information needs of inmates. Information often needed by inmates include legal aid information, survival information, health information, economic information, family information, cultural information, further education, skill acquisitions, life-long learning, recreational study, self-actualization, vocational training and current awareness. Lehman (1999) remarks that inmates lack educational skills and as such are unable to find and maintain gainful employment in contemporary technology-dominated job market when they are out of prison. By implication, the vicious circle of unemployment often leads inmates to recidivism. Against this background, Lehman admonishes that in order to overcome the failure syndrome and improve inmates' self-respect and self-esteem, their psychological and sociological information needs must be catered for before any significant learning towards reformation can take place. It is in this regard that Ahire in Tanimu (2010) defines reformation as measures calculated to impart moral improvement in a person's character so that he will be less inclined to re-offend in the future. Prison reform thus, comprises post release efforts made by prison authorities to enable the offender to resettle back in society.

Prison reformation refers to projects and programmes particularly education and skill acquisitions that are designed for incarcerated persons in a prison environment which are intended to effect a positive impact on the inmates and with the aim of rehabilitating and reintegrating them back into society. Literature on reformation provision in Nigerian prisons reveals serious concern,

dissatisfaction and disgruntlement among scholars, especially with the poor implementation of prison reformation programmes as there is hardly any meaningful reformation and rehabilitation of the inmates (Awe, 1968; Odekunle, 1981; Alemika, 1990; Ahire, 1990; Tanimu, 2006). This is against the fact that the Nigerian Prison Service has reformation as one of her fundamental principles.

The main philosophy behind reformation is the belief that convicts would have a positive change of attitude to prevent future criminality (Quinney, 1979). This, therefore, suggests that there is a link between reduced recidivism and education and the prison library plays an important role in supporting prison education objectives. The prison library is, therefore, an incentive to education as the prison contains library resources that further the reformation goals of the prison. The prison library is a place which supports the mental health of prisoners (Marshall, 2011; Lehmann, 2011). Reading also helps to strengthen inmates' character, increase religious devotion and behaviour modification. Inmates are generally restless and idle. The library, therefore, becomes an effective way of engaging inmates meaningfully. Marshall (2011) notes that education allows inmates to obtain skills they need to transit back into the society once they are released and the library assists them learn these skills. Such reformation programmes often include continuing education instructions in General Certificate of Education (GCE), West African Examination Council School Certificate (WAECSC), external degrees programmes, literacy classes, life skills classes, typing instructions, entrepreneurial skills, vocational skills instructions such as tailoring, carpentry, basketry and weaving, hairdressing and the use of the library among others skills. Prison libraries also assist inmates in getting in contact with family members, thus acting as positive influence on their lives. These reform programmes are designed and targeted at inmates with the expectation that one day they would be free and be useful to themselves and, as a consequence, contribute to the human capital development of the society.

This study expounds that if prisoners are provided with abundant library information resources such as newspapers, magazines, text books, journals, reference books and other reading materials, they tend to be current, more informed of the happenings in the outside world perhaps even more than their counterparts who are mostly engaged pursuing the mundane things of life. Once shut out from the rest of the world, most inmates soon realize that the prison library is the only world exposed to them (Dike, 2002 and Campbell 2006). They become voracious readers as the interest to continue and complete their education among those who dropped out of school is high. The

provision of library information materials becomes necessary in order to ensure purposeful utilization which is crucial to the reformation and transformation in order to aid their psychological well-being.

According to Ward (2004), psychological well-being entails various psychological, emotional, physical health and wellness of individuals. Inmates necessarily need to come to terms with their present condition by having a sound frame of mind to know how to cope with the realities of life in prison in order to participate fully in prison reformation programmes that would aid their reintegration into society. It is against this backdrop that Jefferies (1975) also observes that the inmate's self-concept is distorted as soon as he arrives prison. He would, therefore, need books on personality development, personal growth, the mind and how it functions. Such information materials restore confidence in the inmates while in prison and life afterwards.

This study has opened a vista into the poor state of infrastructural facilities and equipment or the lack of these in most Nigerian prison libraries. Also, the prisons under study do not boast of adequate provision of library information resources that are required to drive the prison education reformation goal through the provision of necessary information materials that would aid inmates 'learning and educational advancement while in prison. On this note Dike (2002) observed that most prison libraries in Nigeria lack adequate provision of library information materials/resources with which to pre-occupy and engage the inmates in their educational pursuit. Lack of basic infrastructural facilities could impact negatively on the psychological well-being of prison inmates (Bryuns, 2007). Psychological well-being of inmates is further impaired when they cannot gain easy access to the few available library information materials, which could be used to solve their information problems due to censorship and other restrictions. Faced with these psychological battles, inmates become idle and restless thus finding it difficult and stressful to cope and survive in prison. These challenges make the prospects of reintegration back into society as transformed citizens illusive. This study, therefore, focuses on the information needs of prison inmates and the extent to which libraries can significantly contribute by supporting prison educational programmes through the provision of library services in ensuring reformation and also in enhancing the psychological well-being of inmates in Nigerian prisons.



## METHODOLOGY

### Population

The study was conducted in two selected prisons in Southeastern Nigeria. These were, Harbour Road Prison, Port Harcourt, Rivers State and Aba Prison, Abia State. The study used the descriptive research design. It adopted the survey method in collecting data from respondents in two (2) select prisons where functional libraries are located in Nigeria. A sample of 600 inmates across sexes was purposively selected. The research instruments were structured questionnaire and guided Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Due permission was sought and approval granted by the Nigerian Prison Head of Service Headquarters, Abuja, having explained the objectives for undertaking the study. The researchers were advised by the Nigerian Prison Command Headquarters to comply with all ethical issues which were fully adhered to. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics of Pearson correlation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The target population of this study comprised prison inmates in the two (2) functional prison libraries in Aba, Abia State and Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. This is made up of a total of 600 prison inmates. A structured questionnaire on prison inmates tagged “Information Needs as a Reformatory Tool for Prison Inmates” was employed to collect data. This was designed, validated and used to collect data on respondents’ demographic characteristics and information needs from the respondents.

**Table 1: Study Population and Sample of Prison Inmates**

<b>Prison Libraries</b>	<b>Total Population of Inmates</b>	<b>Sample size</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Port Harcourt (Rivers State)</b>	422	254	161	57.3
<b>Abia (Abia State)</b>	178	120	120	42.7
<b>Total</b>	600	374	281	100

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PRISON INMATES

The demographic characteristics of the prison inmates are presented. The result from the study indicates the overall mean sex of the respondents which is 335 males and 39 females among the 374 prison inmates. This translates to 89.57%, and 10.43% for males and females respectively, meaning that there were a few female prison inmates in the Nigerian Prisons. The study further reveals that majority of the respondents possess SSCE (30%) and 23% of these are very active youths who are still in their prime and need to be reformed and reintegrated into society. The result shows that a lot of Nigerian youths are in prison for one crime or the other. This demonstrates that if properly empowered while in prison, they can contribute significantly to human capital development upon release from prison (Table 2.). This result confirms Chiemezie's (2006) views that the Nigerian prison is filled with active youth who are still in their prime and are highly intelligent.

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Prison Inmates**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Male</b>	335	89.57
<b>Female</b>	39	10.43
<b>Total</b>	374	100
<b>Educational Level Attained by the Prison Inmates</b>		
<b>Primary six</b>	53	14
<b>JSSCE</b>	86	23
<b>SSCE</b>	113	30
<b>ND</b>	21	6
<b>B.Sc./HND</b>	18	5
<b>M.Sc./M.A./M.Ed.</b>	14	4
<b>Others</b>	69	18
<b>Total</b>	374	100

The result shows that all the listed areas of information are highly needed by the prison inmates as they all obtained mean scores which cluster around 3 representing “Highly Needed”. More specifically, areas such as recreation, study and life-long learning, education support, skill acquisition, legal aid and health are highly needed with mean scores above 3.08% weighted average. Even other areas such as vocational training, self-actualization, current awareness, survival and coping, psychological needs, cultural information and economic information with lower mean scores compared to the weighted average are also highly needed with high mean scores (Table 3). This result emphasizes the importance of the listed information needs in the lives of inmates even while in incarceration. The implication of the findings demonstrates the importance of legal aid information for the inmates as they do need information on how to secure the services of a good lawyer that could defend their case in court. Also, inmates are exposed to the risk of contracting communicable diseases because of the unclean prison environment. Thus, this result underscores the importance of health information as they necessarily need information on how to keep personal hygiene and where to get medical help when they are ill. The study also reveals the need for inmates to empower themselves through the avenue of the prison education programme to achieve their education fortunes. They need information concerning the different educational programmes such as GCE, WAEC, corresponding courses, OND/HND and other external degree programmes that may be run by the prison authority.

**Table 3: Information Needs of Prison Inmates**

S/N	List	Very Highly Needed	Highly Needed	Occasionally Needed	Not Needed	Total Number of Sample Size
1	Recreation	136	82	83	73	374
2	Study and life-long Learning	143	151	61	19	374
3	Education Support	151	102	86	46	374
4	Skill Acquisition	182	106	64	22	374
5	Self-Actualization	121	112	92	49	374
6	Legal Aid	232	124	15	2	374
7	Health	170	141	63	0	374
8	Psychological Need	111	134	105	24	374
9	Economic Information	74	102	125	73	374

The result from the study shows that most of the information resources are hardly accessible. For instance, Dictionary, Encyclopedias, Bibliography, Directory, Maps and Atlas, Novels which are important information resources to the enhancement of inmates' psychological well-being are not accessible. The result also reveals that only a few information resources such as handbooks, manuals and textbooks are occasionally accessible, with majority of these materials are not accessible at all. Although the internet has its positive learning potentials, particularly in developed countries such as the United States of America and Canada, the internet is simulated and the resources can be sieved out for the learning needs of inmates and this will also help provide them the opportunity to be abreast of trending technology. The study revealed the high restrictions placed on internet accessibility in prison libraries along with other graphic information such as maps and atlases in Nigeria. The reason often given for this restriction may not be far from the dangers associated with some materials on the internet, particularly in Nigeria, where security is a big concern and where internet could expose inmates to so much information, thereby empowering them with lots information that can be manipulated against the prison security formation.

**Table 4: Accessibility of Library Information Resources by Inmates in Aba and Port Harcourt Prisons.**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>List of Information Resources</b>	<b>Very Easily Accessible</b>	<b>Easily Accessible</b>	<b>Occasionally Accessible</b>	<b>Not Accessible</b>
<b>1</b>	Dictionary	7	14	41	312
<b>2</b>	Encyclopedia	4	8	35	327
<b>3</b>	Bibliography	14	25	51	284
<b>4</b>	Handbook and Manual	25	40	122	187
<b>5</b>	Novel	4	5	12	353
<b>6</b>	Newspaper	2	4	13	355
<b>7</b>	Newsletter	2	0	5	367
<b>8</b>	Journal	3	2	8	361
<b>9</b>	Internet	0	0	0	374
<b>10</b>	Bulletin	85	54	94	141
<b>11</b>	Map and atlas	0	0	0	374
<b>12</b>	Textbook	26	39	108	201

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **Inmates Information Needs and Psychological Wellbeing**

The question of information needed by prison inmates is fundamental to prison objectives of reformation programme for the reintegration of inmates into society. This is because most prison inmates have a record of not completing their education at some point or the other, which they could complete while in prison. Stuter in Dalton (2003) reports that the prison library has two roles: to provide inmates with a law library and to support the prison educational programme. Hence, the prison library's primary services is to "support the self-help needs of the inmates, most of whom have dropped out of school and read below a sixth grade level and have never been in a library". This study observes that most prisoners in Nigeria are yet to obtain the ordinary level certificates, are dropouts from secondary school as well as those that could not complete their higher degrees, graduates and post graduates, which is representative of persons that cut across the various disciplines such medicine, engineering, the military, humanities social sciences, the police and lawyers. The prison is indeed, a total system. Variety of library information resources abound and should be made available in prison libraries by concerned authorities. This would support the educational programme towards achieving prison reformation goal as well as enhance the psychological well-being of inmates.

Prison reform programmes have been designed to ensure that inmates complete their schooling through participation in the different external degrees/distant learning programmes organized within the prison environment. The areas inmates often need information include legal aid information, information on continuing education, professional development, economic information, family contact, health information, survival and coping within the prison's ambit of the law. Such information is needed so as to increase inmates' awareness of current happenings in the society as well as empower them on how to acquire new professional skills, improve on their educational advancement and learn how to start a new business enterprise upon completion of prison term. This, it is hoped, would boost their developmental activities while in prison, and fill their knowledge gap thus keep them abreast of new developments prior to reintegration into the Nigerian society.

Through Focus Group Discussion, it was revealed that analysis of the type of information resources required by inmates was not hitherto considered. Consequently, most available information

materials in prison libraries sampled often do not meet the information needs of inmates and, therefore, cannot enhance psychological well-being of the respondents. For instance, Respondents in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Harbour road prison, Port Harcourt, expressed disappointment and frustration in the condition of equipment and furnishing found in the libraries as well as the state of the information materials stocked. Inmates reported that the Port Harcourt prison library is poorly ventilated, ill-equipped and dirty. The books stocked are mainly old, tattered, irrelevant and not current. Majority of the participants complained that they did not find relevant materials to cater for their needs in the library, hence, the difficulty in making progress in their studies. In Aba prison, geography text books available were very old editions and archaic. Also, there was not a single map or atlas for any reference purposes. According to one of the inmates:

After each lecture, especially on geography and even literature we wish to go and do research in the library but as usual, we are disappointed due to unavailability of learning materials. The same thing applies in economic and government. The archaic state of the few books found in the library is deplorable.

This is an eloquent testimony that prison inmates desire standard libraries that are well equipped and stocked with relevant and current resources.

The prison inmates identified a variety of information needs that could aid their continuing education and enhance their psychological well-being in the process of reformation. Such information needs are particularly on legal aid, economics, recreation, health, skill acquisition, entrepreneurship, life-long learning, re-entry into society, institutional regulation and procedure. Such information would increase inmates' awareness and knowledge base and ultimately empower them in their developmental activities in prison. Similarly, such awareness and knowledge base would keep them abreast of current issues before reintegration into society. The findings generally revealed the poor state of information resources available in the prison libraries in Nigeria as such resources consist primarily of archaic materials, which are irrelevant in subjects that could further inmates' progress. Also, most of the books available in these libraries are those donated mainly by religious groups and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, Civil Liberties Organization and Centre for Law Enforcement Education.

It is observed that information needs on vocational training, skill acquisition, cultural information and economic information attracted low response in Aba and Port Harcourt prisons. This reason for this is that majority of Nigeria's prisons' Vocational Training centres and Skill Acquisition Workshops are in a dilapidated state as training equipment and facilities are broken down and, in some cases, non-existent. This finding supports the views of Alemika (1987); Eneku-Evawoma (2001) and Amnesty International (2008) that have continuously re-echoed the abysmal poor state of the nation's prison facilities meant to assist inmates in the various treatment/reformation programmes.

It was revealed from the study that the long distance between the library and inmates' cells poses a major challenge to accessibility of information resources. Respondents desire that libraries are situated within the proximity of inmates' cells where they can easily gain access to a variety of library information materials. Lastly, reports from prison inmates indicated that the size of the library cannot accommodate the inmates compared to the number of users the libraries were originally meant to house. This would obviously makes the library space congested and consequently, library environment not conducive for the inmates to read.

## **Conclusion**

In developed countries, there are several library information resources available for inmates' utilization. Such information resources include recreation, study and life-long learning, legal aid information, information on health, psychological needs and information on current affairs. Although prison reformatory objectives are being pursued in Nigerian prisons, there is deficiency in all the areas of information needs of inmates as the few available information resources in these prisons and which are made available only occasionally include dictionary, encyclopedia and bibliography. In order to satisfy their quest and search for knowledge prison inmates, like free citizens in the larger society and like prisoners in developed societies, require information covering the various aspects of life.

The study submits that information is important because it forms the basis for achieving prison reformation objectives which are usually designed through various treatment programmes. The paper recommends that in order to achieve the desired comprehensive result of rehabilitating inmates and promoting their psychological well-being, government must fund the provision of

adequate information resources necessary to support educational programmes. It is recommended that such information resources should focus on recreation, study and life-long learning, education support, legal aid, vocational training, skill acquisition for self-actualization, awareness on health and current issues, survival and coping, psychological needs, cultural information and economic information.

It is not enough that these resources are provided. Consequently, it is also recommended that prison authorities should ensure the availability of adequate and trained staff to guarantee effective usage of the resources.



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