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### Recommended Citation

Drabinski, Emily and Rabina, Debbie, "Reference Services to Incarcerated People, Part I: Themes Emerging From Answering Reference Questions From Prisons and Jails" (2015). *Brooklyn Library Faculty Publications*. Paper 14.

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# Reference Services to Incarcerated People, Part I

## *Themes Emerging from Answering Reference Questions from Prisons and Jails*

**Emily Drabinski and  
Debbie Rabina**

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*Acknowledgments: We wish to thank Sarah Ball, Supervising Librarian of the New York Public Library Correctional Services Program for her invaluable guidance and support throughout the project and Emily Jacobson, NYPL Correctional Services Librarian.*

*We also wish to thank the thirty-eight students who participated for their service and commitment.*

Reference & User Services Quarterly,  
vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 42–48  
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*Incarcerated people face significant information poverty, both because of limited access to information resources and because incarceration itself produces information needs that cannot be easily met. Through a content analysis of reference questions directed to the New York Public Library's Correctional Services Program, this study articulates the particular information needs of these users. Information needs cluster around self-help and re-entry information, along with general reference queries that typically go unanswered due to the lack of access to the Internet and robust general libraries in correctional facilities. Understanding these needs offers insight for librarians and libraries seeking to better serve incarcerated populations.*

**P**eople in prisons and jails face significant information poverty. Used variously in LIS literature to refer to classes or groups of people who lack either access to information itself or to the digital tools that provide access to information, information poverty describes a situation in which a person cannot access the necessary information to solve a problem or answer a question.<sup>1</sup>

Confronted with policies that prohibit Internet access, as well as limits on the kinds of reading materials deemed acceptable, incarcerated

people do not have the kind of access to information enjoyed by people with Google and well-stocked public libraries close to hand. While some of the information needs of these users are addressed by prison libraries, others remain unanswered.

In New York City, the New York Public Library (NYPL) addresses some of these needs by providing postal mail reference services through its Correctional Services Program. People incarcerated in New York City and State prisons and jails, as well as prisons and jails around the country, mail information requests to the library. These letters are distributed to volunteers who answer them, bridging the gaps between what incarcerated people seek to know and what can reasonably be provided by prison and jail libraries. Volunteers are primarily information professionals with the MLS, along with some library school students and interested laypeople. The authors, who each teach a core reference course at an LIS school in New York City, contacted the Supervising Librarian of the New York Public Library's Correctional Services Program and volunteered their students to answer these reference letters as part of a class assignment. Meant both to teach students the skills of reference work and to meet the needs

of NYPL's program, this service-learning project helped the authors to understand the information needs of people behind bars. Understanding these needs has implications for the provision of reference services to incarcerated populations, and highlights the persistent relevance of the real-time interview to reference work.

This article describes the results of two semesters' work. In the first section we describe the theory of information poverty as a frame for understanding the kinds of reference questions our students answered over the course of two semesters. Next, we detail the procedures and method for the project and describe the data sources and collection methods as well as limitations. This is followed by an analysis of the data and discussion of the findings. Finally we conclude with the project outcomes and plans for further research.

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## LIBRARY SERVICES TO INCARCERATED PEOPLE

The potential pool of patrons in New York prisons and jails is substantial. As of March 2014, the state of New York housed over 80,000 incarcerated people in both county and state facilities. The New York State Department of Correctional Services contains thousands of individuals who have been sentenced for longer than one year. In March 2014 this number was 53,968.<sup>2</sup> The remainder of incarcerated men and women are housed in county jails. The City of New York Department of Correction (DOC) has its own jurisdiction over the five boroughs and its incarcerated population. Rikers Island, a ten-jail compound located adjacent to LaGuardia Airport in the East River, is the main facility for New York City's DOC. Rikers houses a daily average of 12,000 individuals, with a maximum capacity of 15,000.<sup>3</sup>

Library services to people in prisons and jails in New York City and State are provided under a myriad of laws, regulations, and services. In a modern information ecosystem driven by "Googling it," incarcerated people are denied online access to information beyond electronic mail in some federal prisons.<sup>4</sup> Federal prisons are required by federal regulation to provide law library services to incarcerated people that meet a threshold of "reasonable access."<sup>5</sup>

New York State provides library services to its incarcerated population at both the state and county levels, but that service varies depending on location and the number of people in that facility. At the state level, general libraries are required by the New York State Commission of Correction standards.<sup>6</sup> They are modeled on public libraries, staffed by librarians, and offer educational, informational, reference, and referral services to incarcerated patrons. Law libraries are also required in state prisons by a US Supreme Court ruling and these facilities offer basic legal resources including case law, statutes, and state or federal rules and regulations.<sup>7</sup> Of the 90 law libraries in New York State prisons, only four are staffed by librarians; the rest are staffed by correctional officers without library training. County jails

differ from state correctional facilities in that there is no state statute that mandates general library services. However, legal resources are mandated in these institutions by New York State's Commission of Correction. The New York State Library provides financial services to the state and county correctional facilities and helps maintain collections and resources for patrons. General libraries receive funding from NYSL based on service to incarcerated populations in state and county correctional facilities.<sup>8</sup>

The New York Public Library is one of the large public libraries playing an active role in providing additional library services to incarcerated individuals. The Correctional Services Program at NYPL delivers literacy programming to justice system-involved teens and adults, circulates library services inside jail facilities, and provides reference-by-mail services to people housed in New York State's prisons and jails. The reference letter service also reaches beyond New York, drawing letters from prisons and jails across the country. The most recent statistics from NYPL estimate that over 900 unique interactions are had each month in the New York City area, and that services of varying degrees reached 12 New York State facilities in December of 2012.<sup>9</sup>

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## PROJECT GOALS AND RATIONALE

In academic year 2013–14, the authors volunteered their students to answer reference questions received by NYPL's Correctional Services Program. The purposes of this service-learning collaboration were two fold. First, the authors sought authentic reference interactions that could be used to teach students enrolled in a core Information Resources and Services course. As discussed in a companion piece to this article (to be published in *RUSQ* 55:2), authentic reference transactions are well-suited to teaching learning outcomes related to information services. The authors also sought to identify the information needs of individuals in prisons and jails. These patrons experience significant information poverty, in part because federal and state laws require only a minimum of services. NYPL's reference-by-mail service, one of the only services of its kind, offers a way of better understanding these information needs that go unmet by existing library services and resources inside carceral institutions. What prompts a patron to reach outside for more information than can be found behind bars? Understanding these information needs can in turn help librarians improve the sources and services offered to these user populations.

The authors did not imagine that the letters received by NYPL constitute anything like a total representation of the information needs of this patron population. Indeed, the authors were guided by the work of Elfreda Chatman, whose analysis of the "life in the round" experienced by women in a maximum-security prison suggests that while these patrons lack access to certain kinds of information, their "small worlds" constitute deeply functional knowledge communities held together by insiders who enable a world

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## FEATURE

that “both liberates and restricts.”<sup>10</sup> We understood the scope of our analysis to be those information needs that could not be met either by the information-sharing that Chatman describes between insiders and the outsiders seeking to join a knowledge community, or by the limited law library services mandated by the state. When patrons reach out to librarians via mail service, their queries represent an acknowledgement that there is a gap in available resources. Understanding that gap can help librarians trace the limits of currently available resources and services. An analysis of these letters suggests what kinds of books, journals, legal materials, government documents and other resources should be made available, and also what kinds of information needs develop when significant portions of the population are incarcerated.

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### ASSESSING INFORMATION POVERTY

The authors’ assessment of user needs takes place within the framework of *information poverty*. Granting Chatman’s insight that incarcerated people are information poor in only some respects, access to information is still materially limited for people in prisons and jails. While many definitions of information poverty abide, we adopted the definition provided by Britz that describes information poverty as a situation

in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately. It is further characterized by a lack of essential information and a poorly developed information infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

Given poorly funded prison libraries and the lack of Internet access, incarceration produces a context in which people do not have *material means to obtain efficient access*.

Assessing the particular needs of users in prisons and jails beyond access to legal materials has been largely understudied. Many argue for the provision of reading materials, and the American Library Association has adopted a strong statement advocating for the intellectual freedom of these users.<sup>12</sup> As Sullivan has pointed out, early advocacy for prisoner access to reading materials focused on reading as rehabilitative, and became “instruments of cultural hegemony designed to instill a desire to emulate certain behavior and morality.”<sup>13</sup> Even now, advocacy tends to be presented as a defense of the general value of access to information, rather than as an analysis of the information needs produced by the carceral context that are then unmet within its confines.

The particular needs of people in information poor contexts have been explored. Hasler, Ruthven, and Buchanan used posts in online support groups to discern the needs of users “who may be considered marginalized or with stigmatized identities” who turn to the Internet to meet

information needs, often anonymously.<sup>14</sup> Lingel and Boyd conducted a similar study to evaluate the information needs and behaviors of people participating in body modification practices.<sup>15</sup> Finally, studies of virtual reference services offer examples of the use of written reference queries as a resource for evaluating the information needs of users.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, these studies all rely on the production of digital texts, wherein the present study, written letters form the research sample.

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### PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Using the frame of information poverty, the authors sought to answer two questions about the information needs of incarcerated people who seek information through NYPL’s reference-by-mail service. We phrased our research questions as follows:

- RQ1: What are the general characteristics of letters from people in prisons and jails?
- RQ2: What are the information needs expressed in these reference requests?

The collection of letters sent to and answered by our students formed the data set from which we answered these two questions.

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### METHOD

#### Basic Procedure

Students enrolled in a core reference course at an NYC LIS program participated in the project during the Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 semesters. This is a required course, taught in a face-to-face classroom over the course of 15 weeks. A total of thirty-eight students participated in the project.

On the second week of each semester, a representative from NYPL Correctional Services Program came to the class to describe the reference services provided by mail to incarcerated people, the proper protocol for the answers including NYPL practices and protocol for protecting patron privacy, the standard format and disclaimers accompanying each letter, length limitation set by the correctional facilities on prison and jail mail, and finally, the reference sources available from NYPL specifically for people in prisons and jails. One of the most requested sources is the *Connections* book. *Connections* is a 268 page guide of NYC resources to assist people with reentry from carceral institutions. The library distributes this guide upon request.

Following this orientation session, we received scanned letters on a weekly basis from incarcerated people, which were then assigned to the students. This occurred in the beginning of class when each letter was read out loud, and was followed by a discussion of the best search strategies and

sources for filling the information request. Each student answered three letters. The instructor made efforts for each student to answer questions addressing different subject areas.

Students had four to five days to respond to the question. Answers were emailed to the instructor, who reviewed the answers, and if necessary, requested corrections or modifications. Once complete, the answers were sent to NYPL where they were printed out and mailed to the letter writers. The process of answering the questions, including time needed for modifications, was one week.

### Data Source

The results presented here are based on a data source of 112 letters received during academic year 2013–14. Letters often contained more than one reference question, resulting in a total of questions that exceeds the number of letters received.

### Data Analysis

The researchers employed mainly qualitative content analysis methods and applied them to issues and themes that emerged from the data sources. Analysis followed steps described by Zhang and Wildmuth (2009), and included data preparation (anonymizing questions, collecting data sources into spreadsheet), defining the unit of analysis (reference questions), developing themes categories, and coding the data sources.<sup>17</sup> The researchers completed Human Subject Assurance training as required by their university and followed patron confidentiality guidelines practiced by New York Public Library. All identifying information was separated from the reference questions, and no personal information was collected.

Manual coding was carried out by the authors who identified broad categories based on the research questions. Both authors coded a sample of the data sources (8 percent) to determine inter-rater reliability, which was achieved at a 90 percent level. Subsequently, coding of data sources was divided between the authors.

## RESULTS

To answer the first research question, *what are the general characteristics of letters from people in prisons and jails*, we analyzed each letter for the writer's geographic location, gender, and salutation. We used the salutation as an indicator for returning users. Letter writers who previously used the service sometimes opened the letter with a personal greeting to the person who answered their previous letter (e.g., Dear Ms. Doe).

### General Profile

- Prison location: NY State—95 (84 percent) Out of state—18 (16 percent)

- Gender of letter writer: Men—111 (98 percent) Women—2 (2 percent)
- Personal greeting: Yes—21 (19 percent) No—92 (81 percent)

### Information Needs

To answer the second research question, *What are the information needs expressed in these reference requests*, we analyzed the letters and sorted them into three broad categories: *Re-entry*, *Self-help*, and *Reference*.

The **Re-entry** category includes questions relating to the letter writer's preparations for re-entry upon their release from prison. These included questions about half-way houses, social security benefits, and other practical matters. We coded questions under this category only when the user specified that the question was related to re-entry.

My release from state prison arrives in 13 months & I would like to start getting ready for the world. I must do my post release in Syracuse NY, so I need . . . [SP14\_050]

The **Self-help** category includes questions that relate to efforts by letter writers to improve their own circumstances while in prison. These include questions about rights to medical services, opportunities for studying while in prison, and information that will help letter writers aid in their own defense.

I'm currently incarcerated and I am looking for information on the Americans with Disability Act. The Law was enacted in 1990. I believe that I'm being discriminated because of my disability while in prison [F13\_038]

The **Reference** category includes all other reference questions that are not specifically about re-entry or self-help. These include a wide range of questions from baseball statistics to neuroscience.

I am an incarcerated male writing to you today to request information on Emmit [sic] Till, Harriet Tubman and to request a copy of Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech. [F13\_048]

An analysis of the letters yielded the broad breakdown illustrated in figure 1 (p. 46).

We further broke down each broad theme into smaller sub-themes: questions about re-entry, questions about self-help, and general reference questions. Tables 1–3 describe the numbers of question under each sub-theme along with several brief examples.

## FEATURE

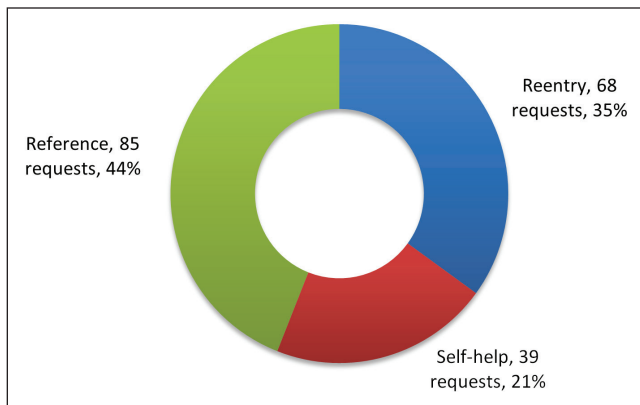


Figure 1. Request Themes

## DISCUSSION

### General Characteristics of Letters from Incarcerated People

The data source was drawn from letters sent to the New York Public Library's Correctional Services Program. Unsurprisingly, the majority (82 percent) of the letters were from people housed in prisons and jails in New York City and State. Still, the 18 percent of letters from outside the state indicate the extended reach of the program, and suggest that a reference-by-mail service like that offered by NYPL would be useful in other parts of the country.

Nearly one-fifth of the letters (19 percent) opened with personal greetings, a direct indicator that the letter writer had used the letter service previously. This number is likely low, as people may use the service multiple times without a personal greeting. This suggests that the letter service, like other reference services, produces a relationship between the user and the librarian. While the focus of this study is on the need for information, the presence of these relationships and their sustainability is a potential area for further study.

Only 2 percent of the letters came from female letter writers (as indicated by the institution name; prisons and jails are sex-segregated). While the number of incarcerated people who are female is vastly smaller than the male population—only 7 percent of the prison population nationwide is female—the authors wonder if outreach to these populations has been sufficient.<sup>18</sup>

### Information Needs of Incarcerated People

We found that letter writers requested information from three main categories, described above at Re-entry, Self-help, and Reference. Just over half of the questions, 56 percent, related to the every-day life of people in prisons and jails, namely re-entry and self-help information. The remaining 46 percent were general reference questions, and here the variety of topics was quite fascinating.

Table 1. Re-Entry Subtheme

Re-Entry	Summary of Examples from Letters
Connections book (21 requests)	Requests for the Connections book
Job Information (26 requests)	Sanitation civil service booklet Information on obtaining a car dealer license Commercial Driver's Manual & barber's license
Social Services (26 requests)	New York State ADA complaint form Obtaining Social Security number after adoption Benefits for spouses and dependents

Table 2. Self-help Subtheme

Self-Help	Summary of Examples from Letters
Rights of incarcerated people (19 requests)	AA & LGBT services for incarcerated Rights for incarcerated people under ADA
Education (13 requests)	Typing classes Martial arts classes
Own Defense (7 requests)	Jailhouse Lawyer's Manual Case law relating to own trial

I am seeking the plant society that deals with Bromeliads. [SP14.044]

At present I am very interested in Tantra Yoga. This teaching has furnished me with awesome insights to Universal Consciousness which I find tremendously stimulating . . . I would love to continue this journey with assistance from the Correctional Library Services if possible. [F13.034]

Franz Bardon, the author of "Initiation Into Hermetics," did he leave a foundation or institute? [SP14.018]

I need all companies in the US that buy perfume bottle designs. [F13.040]

The general reference questions indicate that people incarcerated in prisons and jails have general information needs whose purpose may be to satisfy curiosity, help start a business, expand knowledge about a philosophical or religious situation, or any of the other myriad reasons humans seek out information over the course of a lifetime. In this way, the letters reveal what we already know: that incarcerated people are like anyone, interested in learning more about their worlds. In the absence of access to the Internet or an extensive ready reference collection, these patrons reach out to librarians in a quite traditional way.

In the Self-help and Re-entry categories, however, we

**Table 3.** Reference Subtheme

Reference	Summary of examples from letters
Bibliography (16 requests)	Request for catalogs of several publishers of firearms books and car dealers Request for a quote from a book Recent publications for several authors Strong's Concordance of the Bible
Medical information (6 requests)	Information on the brain and neuroanatomy Nutrition
New Age (3 requests)	Mineral and crystal formation Tantra yoga Healing yoga
General Information (51 requests)	Geographic maps Baseball statistics Song lyrics China's constitution in English Designer eyeglasses Haile Selassie & Rastafarian religion
Private Information (9 requests)	Personal address for public official (out of scope) Habeas Corpus petition from the 1989 case Newspaper clippings about a mobster

begin to see needs that cannot be met by library materials inside prisons even while they are produced by the prison system itself. In many cases, letter writers requested information to solve problems related directly to their incarceration and problems that incarceration would produce upon release:

Please send me anything current (2010 to now) about corrections health care laws/memos in reference to liquidating or crushing medications. [SP14.046]

I would appreciate if you could help me out by finding out what programs out there provide felons grants for graduate school. [F13.026]

I am writing to you because I will be released from prison August 2014 & I would like a listed of in patient drug programs to continue my drug recovery. [SP14.032]

I sustained a leg injury playing football breaking my Tibia Bone, fracturing my Fibula and Ankle. I would like to find out the standard medical treatment for my type of injury, whereby, if not handled properly, will cause long term permanent [sic] pain. [SP14.051]

In these cases, letter writers reached out to the reference service to solve the daily problems of incarceration—substandard medical care, or medical care they could not

control—as well as issues that follow upon release, e.g., the lack of access to scholarship funds or drug treatment programs. Interestingly, the authors would assume that at least some information related to managing these problems would be available “in the round,” as Chatman would suggest, as all patrons in prison or jail negotiate the shared challenges of life in these institutional contexts. The letters suggest, however, that the knowledge community is insufficient to meet the related information needs of incarcerated people.

A second interesting line of questions concerned post-incarceration employment opportunities. Like many patrons of public libraries, the letter writers sought job information, but a striking number asked about entrepreneurial and self-employment opportunities:

I would like information on ‘car wrap companies’ which simply different companies will pay to have their logos and ads temporarily applied to your personal vehicle. [SP14\_010]

I need to know which innovative environmental technologies are the E.P.A.-SBIR program soliciting proposals for. Is it soliciting proposals for environmentally friendly motors? [SP14\_016]

I would like to receive any other information geared toward small businesses starting a small business. [F14\_005]

These excerpts represent the range of entrepreneurial requests, from the very specific to the broad and general. In all cases, these requests are perhaps an acknowledgement of the very real deleterious effects of incarceration on the job and career prospects of individuals. In reaching out to the NYPL reference-by-mail service, these users point both to a problem of information poverty—how does one access start-up information while incarcerated?—as well as the role incarceration plays in the production of such information needs. In the face of drastically reduced employment options, incarcerated people may turn to entrepreneurship and self-employment as their best available option.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Information poverty affects incarcerated people. Lack of access to the Internet as well as limited library services prevents users from finding answers to questions without the intermediary of information professionals or volunteers. Incarceration itself produces information needs that it then cannot meet, particularly regarding self-help and employment both inside and outside the carceral institution.

At the same time, the letters suggest another kind of need: personal contact with someone outside prison walls. Just as public librarians' work with patrons sometimes fulfills the simple desire for the discursive connection of the reference

interview, the letters—many of them from patrons who have used the service before—suggest an affective dimension of the reference letter service, one that goes beyond the scope of this analysis, but which offers an area for further research. The vectors along which people in prisons and jails seek that affective connection might usefully inform collection building for prison librarians.

The collaboration between the MLS classroom and the NYPL Correctional Services Program has provided a useful snapshot of the kinds of information needs presented by incarcerated people. As noted in the companion piece to this article (to be published in *RUSQ* 55:2), the project has proven very useful in meeting general reference learning outcomes in the classroom and in transforming the perspectives of students who begin to see reference services as urgent and critical, even in a time of Google. The project has also begun to usefully frame the concrete information needs of people in prisons and jails, needs that can be better addressed when librarians know in particular what they are. The authors intend to continue gathering data as the project moves forward, and expect to deepen their collaboration with peers working in correctional library services in New York City.

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