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Beyond Books: Restorative Librarianship in Juvenile Detention Centers

Description

It is clear from both anecdotal evidence and a review of professional library literature that the primary focus of library services in detention centers is on providing recreational reading materials and encouraging literacy. While promoting literacy is a core value of every librarian as well as an important step in rehabilitating teens and preparing them to be productive community members, libraries have much more to offer teens and JDCs. By expanding the vision of detention library services to reach beyond literacy and recreational reading, libraries can become integral partners in the mission of the juvenile courts—affecting a positive change in teens and in their communities.

Keywords

library services, juvenile detention centers, restorative justice

Disciplines

Juvenile Law | Law Enforcement and Corrections | Library and Information Science

Comments

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Beyond Books

RESTORATIVE LIBRARIANSHIP IN JUVENILE DETENTION CENTERS

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Public libraries have a long history of providing services and resources that build and strengthen communities. By offering free access to information and safe communal spaces, libraries encourage growth—both intellectual and social—in community members. There is no greater need for this aspect of librarianship than in the lives of incarcerated community members—especially incarcerated teens.

Providing a library collection or library services in a juvenile detention center (JDC) is not a new idea. Existing service models differ depending on the nature of the detention center (short- versus long-term), and include everything from bookmobile visits and booktalks to an in-house branch of the local public library.¹ Examples of successful programs can be seen across the country, from Seattle (through the King County Public Library) to New York (through the Brooklyn Public Library).

It is clear from both anecdotal evidence and a review of professional library literature that the primary focus of library services in detention centers is on providing recreational reading materials and encouraging literacy. But, as Katherine Dittman notes, “Literacy is not enough.”² Promoting literacy *is* a core value of every librarian as well as an important step in rehabilitating teens and preparing them to be productive community members, but libraries have much more to offer teens and JDCs. By expanding the vision of detention library services to reach beyond literacy and recreational reading, libraries can become integral partners in the mission of the juvenile courts—affecting a positive change in teens and in their communities.

Survey of Librarians and Detention Staff

To identify how libraries can best support the mission and programs of JDCs, it is necessary to (1) understand the mission of the juvenile courts, (2) identify library strengths that can support that mission, and (3)

identify the challenges (and possible solutions) to initiating and maintaining successful partnerships. To this end, two surveys were conducted, drawing on selected samples from both juvenile justice and librarianship. The first survey was mailed to all JDCs in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho; responses were solicited from both juvenile court administrators and detention managers. Though the survey covered a limited geographic area, the variance in size, nature, and mission of the JDCs surveyed provides a close approximation of national differences. The companion survey sought input from librarians serving JDCs and was administered online using SurveyMonkey. Responses were solicited from the Pacific Northwest Library Association, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Prison Librarians electronic discussion lists.³ Both surveys received an excellent response: forty-two returns from the JDC survey (a response rate of 53 percent), and fifty-six returns from the librarian survey. Returns from the JDC survey included responses from facilities both with and without current library services; returns from the librarian survey only included responses from librarians currently serving JDCs.

Just Doing Time?

It's a common perception—held by community members, teens, and even some detention staff—that teens in detention are simply “doing time”: paying their debt to society and, if they're lucky, keeping up on their education. It is this perception that has largely contributed to the current place that library services hold in most JDCs. After all, what better way to pass the time than by reading a book? And isn't that what libraries do—provide books? The survey of detention staff bears this out: *89 percent* of respondents at a facility with some form of library services believed the most important functions of a library in a detention center were providing “recreational reading/way to pass time” and “literacy development.” The current pattern of library services, as reported in the librarian survey, indicates that libraries are doing little to dissuade JDCs of this notion. The most commonly reported services were filling requests (59 percent), readers' advisory (50 percent), book discussion groups (43 percent), and booktalks (41 percent).

If it were true that the sole mission of JDCs was to help teens pass time, there would be little need for libraries to expand their partnership with detention centers. By the same token, there would be little need for detention centers to make partnerships with libraries a priority. But the mission of the juvenile

courts (and their detention centers) is undergoing a renaissance of which libraries should take notice and recognize as a means to move from being seen as a supplementary service to being a vital partner working with incarcerated teens.

Restorative Justice in JDCs

In the last decade, the philosophy of *restorative justice* has slowly gained a toehold in the North American justice system. Whereas a purely punitive approach to justice emphasizes punishment and retribution, restorative justice emphasizes meaningful repayment for harms done; and a purely rehabilitative approach encourages offenders to dwell on their own victimization and brokenness, restorative justice encourages offenders to take accountability for their actions and responsibility for their futures.

Further setting it apart, restorative justice takes an unprecedented interest in the needs of not only offenders' victims, but also their communities. Victims are given a voice by having a meaningful role in deciding how offenders can best be held accountable for their actions. The community is given a role in embracing the victim and in helping reintegrate the offender into the community.

Many members of the juvenile justice community see restorative justice as an especially appropriate approach to dealing with juvenile offenders. Through restorative justice's holistic approach, the opportunity exists to transform young offenders into accepted and productive members of their communities.

As noted by the administrators of the Juvenile Court in Clark County, Washington, the three guiding principles of restorative justice are accountability, community safety, and competency development.⁴ Not surprisingly, these goals were the most common survey responses when detention staff members were asked to identify the mission(s) of their detention facilities. The most commonly cited aspect of JDCs' missions was the safety and security of the teens and the community—obviously a key concern for a detention facility. But accountability and competency development were also frequently listed as important elements.

Making Time Count

So what does the move to a restorative mission in detention facilities mean? At the broadest level, it means that detention centers are transforming the idea of teens “doing time” into the reality of incarcerated teens actually making time count. To that end,

juvenile courts dedicated to restorative justice are making a concerted effort to ensure that, while in detention, teens “have access to a wide range of educational, skill-building treatment and intervention resources that are appropriate and responsive to their interests and needs, as well as those of the community.”⁵

With the transition in JDCs from doing time to making time count, libraries have the opportunity to demonstrate that they are more than just books—that they can have a meaningful effect on accountability and competency development. Certainly, these are concepts that every public librarian is familiar with in some way. (After all, what better example of accountability is there than an overdue notice?) The next step is identifying how libraries can support these goals inside a detention center.

Accountability

There are many ways librarians can encourage accountability in the teens with which they work. The simplest, of course, is the action of checking out books and returning them in good shape. One of the most commonly cited challenges for the librarians who responded to the survey is damage to or loss of materials. But by working with teens and establishing relationships with them, librarians can encourage respectful behaviors and hold teens accountable for their actions. Jill Morrison, librarian at Washington’s King County Youth Service Center, has worked to build respect with the teens there, resulting in no tagging (graffiti) in the library space, and very little tagging in books.⁶

More important than teaching respect for library

materials, however, is conveying the importance of taking accountability for the actions that landed the teens in detention and for their actions in the future. One of the most successful approaches is the use of focused discussion groups. By using techniques similar to those in character-based literacy instruction (frequently used by teachers at alternative schools), librarians can focus discussion around a fictional

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protagonist's choices and the consequences of those choices. Teens can then "apply this cognitive experience to their own lives, evaluate the choices they've made, and begin to question their own thought patterns and habits."⁷ Many librarians, such as Naomi Angiers at Multnomah County, Oregon, already lead successful discussion groups with the teens they serve.⁸ By tailoring these groups to focus on restorative outcomes, librarians can be of greater value in the eyes of juvenile court administrators.

Beyond directly working with teens to encourage accountability, librarians working in JDCs can partner with detention staff by providing resources such as curriculum, videos, and workbooks related to facilitating programs and groups for teens. It is encouraging that, in the JDC survey, 71 percent of the detention staff at facilities without current library services expressed a desire for a library to provide these types of resources.

Competency Development

Competency development is a key component of all detention-center programming. Though speaking specifically of education, Walter MacFarlane, superintendent of the Virginia Department of Correctional Education, expressed the rationale behind competency development: "We hope that educational opportunities will improve the average inmate and help him turn from crime. This change has benefits that reach far beyond the prison walls and ultimately has a payoff for any would-be crime victim."⁹

Activities aimed at transforming troubled teens into healthy, responsible citizens are at the core of competency development. While teaching accountability is a vital first step in this process of transformation, giving teens the tools to function in positive ways on the outside is extremely important. It is here, by promoting both intellectual and social growth, that libraries can have the most positive impact.

While most detention centers offer educational programming (often associated with the local educational service district), there often is a need for more. Mike Riggan, former detention manager at Clark County Juvenile Detention Center in Washington State, notes that "most detention programs are begging for additional programming to be delivered on a consistent basis."¹⁰ Libraries can provide that additional programming in the form of materials, educational resources, funding, and extra staff.

Technology Instruction

Beyond basic literacy and curricular instruction, another important aspect of education in detention

is vocational—teaching teens about the responsibility that comes with employment, helping them explore employment options, and teaching skills that will help their job search. At many JDCs the librarian may be limited to using print materials or showing videos, but at facilities with computing resources available (see figure 1), these can be the primary mode of vocational research and skill training. The ubiquity of computer technology demands that if teens are to be successful members of their communities upon release—whether as students, employees, or both—they will have to be computer literate. As people who are specially trained to help others access and navigate information, librarians are well suited to tutor teens in computing processes.

At the most basic level, a librarian can offer instruction on how to navigate a computer's operating system. After learning basic computing, teens would benefit from learning simple software packages. Word processing (preferably Microsoft Word or a similar program) is an important skill. Learning to use simple spreadsheet or desktop publishing programs can prepare teens for many functions required in school or entry-level employment. If Internet access is available, and JDC policies allow it, librarians can help teens do vocational research online. Computer tutorials in such areas as reading and math can also be an effective way to build a variety of skills. Finally, using computer applications to perform creative projects can be a meaningful way to engage (and teach) teens—for example, using desktop publishing applications to produce anthologies of teen poetry, writing, and art.

Library and Social Skills

As important as it is for teens to gain skills that will help them find employment on the outside, it is even more important that they gain skills that will enable them to be socially competent when they return to their communities. Because libraries are, in a sense, communities in microcosm, with similar social expectations, opportunities, and challenges, librarians are perfectly situated to help teens acquire these competencies. By introducing teens to public library services—familiarizing them with the space and the expectations—librarians can ease the process of reintegration into their communities. Yet, in the library survey, only 25 percent offered any kind of library-skills training, and only 9 percent coordinated contact or follow-up with the local public library upon a teen's release.

In her work at the Youth Service Center library, Morrison tries to stress the importance of teens

becoming comfortable with library use. By introducing teens to call numbers, book spines, the differences between fiction and nonfiction, and the general layout of library resources and facilities, Morrison hopes they will not only be comfortable walking into a public library in their community, but also feel that they belong there.¹¹ That sense of belonging is a key component to a teen's successful reintegration to his or her community.

Whereas basic library-skills instruction can help teens feel comfortable using the public library, instruction about the library ethos can help teens feel more comfortable in the community at large. Libraries, by their very nature, encourage respect for other's differences, offer equitable service regardless of social standing, and encourage free discourse. These are expectations that translate to all social interactions, and if teens are comfortable with these values, they are more likely to be respectful of those around them and be healthy community members. By demanding and modeling these values in the library space inside, librarians play a vital role in preparing teens for expectations outside.

Beyond offering lessons on how to interact with others, libraries offer opportunities for those interac-

tions. Library spaces in JDCs should be no different. Bringing in authors and community members from diverse backgrounds to interact with the teens can be an opportunity to connect teens with mentors, to offer inspiration, and to reinforce lessons on respect. (California's Alameda County Library, winner of a 2006 President's Committee on Arts and Humanities award for its work in a local detention facility, has made a determined effort to bring in well-known authors to visit with the teens incarcerated there.¹²) As Lynn Anderson notes in her 2002 article "Books in Prison," it is "the work of mentoring and commitment, [and] teaching and listening" that is absolutely vital to working with teens in detention.¹³

From Current Success to Future Stability

Whether providing mentorship opportunities, teaching valuable computer skills, leading book groups, or helping teens prepare to return to—and succeed in—their communities, it's clear that there are many ways that librarians can contribute to the restorative mission of the juvenile courts. Yet for every example of a successful partnership between a public library

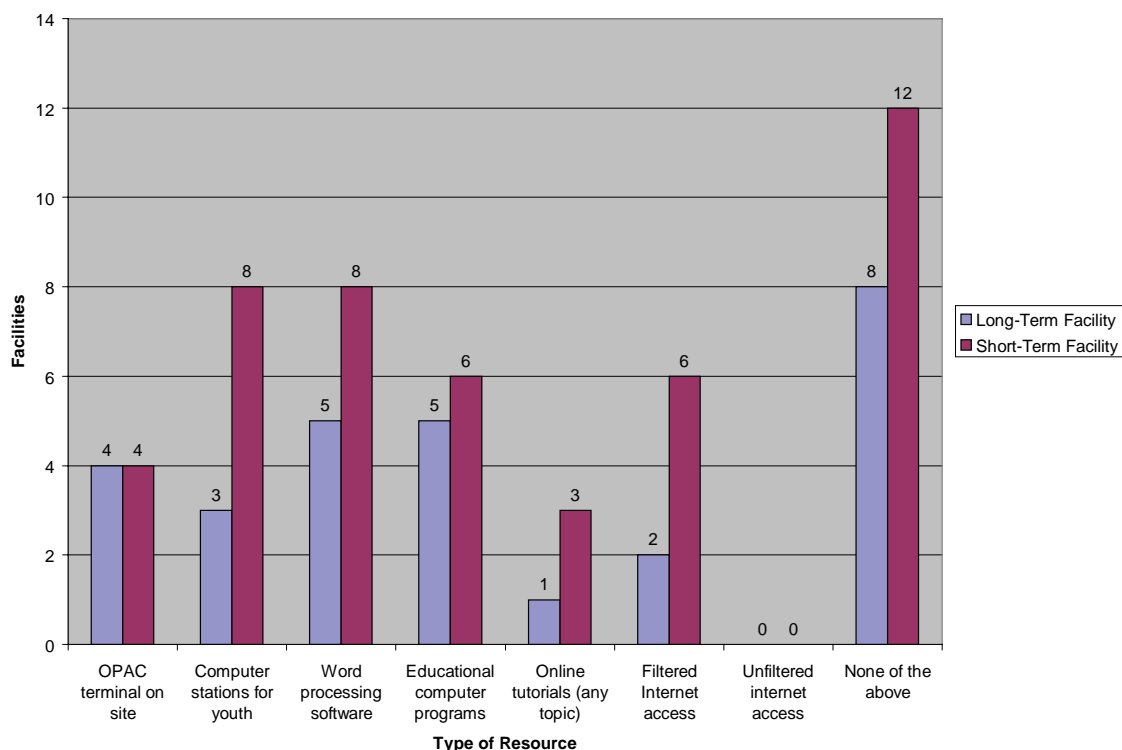


Figure 1. Technology Available in JDC Libraries (Librarian Survey)

and a JDC (see figure 2), there are just as many examples of facilities where partnerships are tenuous or don't exist—only 20 percent of the respondents to the library survey had a written service agreement in place, while nearly 33 percent of the respondents to the JDC survey had no library services. So how do libraries move past the point where their services are viewed in a positive, yet not always permanent, light?

The first step is ensuring that libraries tie the services they are offering directly to the mission(s) and goals of the juvenile court with which they partner. Listen to juvenile court administrators like Clark County's Ernie Veach-White, who sees library services as a beneficial way for “kids to do some exploring, research, and learning about their behavior, thinking errors, substance abuse, educational needs, etc., while in detention . . . a kind of guided self-examination/self-help/action planning process.”¹⁴ Working closely with detention staff to determine their needs and goals will ensure that the library earns a lasting place within the facility.

Even with a shared mission, however, several challenges exist for libraries seeking to provide services in JDCs. Among these are funding, staffing, philosophy, and space:

- Fifty percent of the detention facilities without current library services indicated that a lack of funding was a main reason for lack of services; 72 percent of the same facilities said they would be interested in having services if the public library would fund them.
- Thirty-six percent of the detention facilities without current library services indicated that a lack of staffing to administer a library collection or supervise a space was a main reason for lack of services.
- Thirty-eight percent of librarians reported censorship by detention staff related to material content, while 31 percent reported censorship related to safety concerns about the physical nature of materials.

Library

King County (Wash.) Public Libraries

Newport (Ore.) Public Library

Alameda County (Calif.) Library

Multnomah County (Ore.) Library

Brooklyn (N.Y.) Public Library

St. Louis (Mo.) Public Library

Chesterfield County (Va.) Public Library

Anderson (Ind.) Public Library

Miami-Dade (Fla.) Public Library

Ketchikan (Alaska) Public Library

Ocean County (N.J.) Library

Hennepin County (Minn.) Library

Johnson County (Kans.) Library

Services Offered to Facility

In-house branch of public library with full services

Weekly librarian visits

Partnership between library and educational staff, authors visits, discussion groups, in-house collections

Weekly librarian visits, rotating collection, author visits

Library cards, book delivery, book clubs

Booktalks, discussion groups, in-house collection

Rotating deposit collection, requests, discussion groups for incarcerated and recently released teens

Librarian visits, rotating collection and requests, discussion groups, library-skills training, contact/follow-up with local library

Bookmobile service, requests, reference, library-skills training

Rotating deposit collection, requests, readers' advisory, reference

In-house collection, weekly librarian visits, readers' advisory, requests

Discussion groups, writing workshops, author visits, literary magazine, in-house collection

Booktalks and discussion groups, writing workshops, author visits

Figure 2. Examples of Successful Library—JDC Partnerships

- Thirty-six percent of the librarians responding to the survey indicated that a lack of space was a challenge to providing services; 43 percent of the detention facilities without current library services indicated that one of the main reasons was lack of room for a library collection/space.

Overcoming these three pragmatic challenges (and one philosophical difference) are the final steps to ensuring a lasting relationship between a library and detention facility.

Funding and Staffing

The best approach to solving funding problems will vary, depending on the resources of the library, facility, and local government. While it is possible to use grant money (for example, Library Services and Technology Act grants, American Library Association [ALA] grants, private grants) to initially fund a program, it is essential to obtain a commitment from the library system, the state, and the county to provide long-term funding. As Bonnie Crell, in the 1986 article “Developing Detention Libraries,” so aptly stated, “Never, never substitute outside funding for agency dollars, unless you do *not* believe that your library program is as worthwhile as every other program.”¹⁵ Make sure that the juvenile courts believe that your library program is as worthwhile as every other program.

Solving a staffing shortfall is directly related to the issue of funding. By providing library personnel whose salaries are paid by the library, or by coordinating community volunteers, the library can take a burden off the detention facility. Not only can library staff manage library collections and provide library-specific services, but they can also collaborate with detention or school district staff. These collaborations are valuable for the teens, but can also further integrate the library into the facility.

Censorship

While issues of funding and staffing have more clear-cut solutions, overcoming the challenge of philosophical differences between librarians and detention staff can be a sensitive process. Patrick Jones and others working with incarcerated teens have written extensively about the challenge posed by both format and content restrictions in JDCs. Jones defines the challenge thus: “Librarians are paid to provide free access to information; correctional officers are paid to work in an environment where freedom is limited.”¹⁶

As in any library, having a collections policy is an important method of settling disputes over content.

But, unlike the local public library on the outside, librarians “inside” may not have the final say when it comes to the provisions in that policy. On the outside, parents have the right to decide what their children will read. Inside the facility, however, the detention staff acts *in loco parentis*, and librarians must agree to limitations that would normally cause them to cringe. But even the strictest proponent of intellectual freedom will admit that there is little sense in providing novels that glorify death to potentially suicidal teens, or in providing sexually explicit books to a young sexual offender. By working closely with detention staff, librarians will still be able to provide a wide variety of quality materials to the teens.

More than a Space

The lack of space in current detention facilities speaks volumes not only about detention budgets in general, but also about the current view of library services in JDCs. If there is a lack of a dedicated space for a library, it means three things: (1) there was no consideration for a library during facility planning; (2) the planners viewed a library as a supplementary, not a core, service; and (3) there were certainly no librarians involved in the planning process.

If libraries are to truly become integral partners in the mission of the juvenile courts—in both short- and long-term facilities—then libraries need to be an intentional part of new facilities. Obviously, this doesn’t help libraries working to establish their presence in current JDCs. Gaining a dedicated library space at an existing facility may not be possible at first, but by patiently demonstrating the value of library services (and tying them to the mission of the facility), it can be surprising what opens up. Or, as was the case at Virginia’s Beaumont Juvenile Correction Center, state standards may encourage facilities to add or upgrade library spaces.¹⁷

For libraries to be a part of the plan in new facilities, librarians must expand their job descriptions and act as advocates and politicians. By becoming familiar with standards for detention facilities (such as the American Correctional Association standards), ALA standards for juvenile correctional facilities, and the missions and goals of JDCs, librarians can build a case for the necessity of library services. By presenting that case to juvenile court administrators, county officials, and state legislators—along with a plan for funding and service delivery—librarians can convey the benefit of adding libraries to new facilities (see figure 3).

Beyond Books

It may seem sacrilegious, but it is only by moving beyond books that librarians will find a lasting place in juvenile detention centers. By focusing on the varied ways in which libraries can support the restorative aims of the juvenile courts, librarians will not only promote literacy, but also truly help teens make their time inside count. Public libraries are spaces of community growth, community integration, accountability, and freedom. By bringing these values along with their books, libraries will have a restorative effect on incarcerated teens and their communities. [📖](#)

“Quick Start” Guide: Tips for Initiating JDC Library Services

Contact local detention facility and juvenile court administrator to discuss how the library can best support the mission of the facility

Research funding sources—seek both outside funding and funding from the public library, detention facility, and relevant government agencies

Based on needs of facility and available funding, create service proposal and present to library board; have a plan for growth

Create collection policy and service agreement; collaborate with detention manager and juvenile court administrator; be intentional about focus/purpose of services (will collection emphasize curricular support, recreational reading, and so forth?)

Initiate services—start small and grow as you earn the trust of teens, detention staff, and administration

Develop relationships with detention staff, education personnel, and local government representatives; seek opportunities for collaboration

Evaluate services; be prepared to demonstrate the value your services add to the facility

Have fun!

Figure 3. Tips for Initiating JDC Library Services

References and Notes

1. A short-term facility may be a facility that holds teens until they are transported to a different facility, or one that only holds teens for limited amounts of time (e.g., while awaiting adjudication or for status or probation offenses). A long-term facility (also known as a “correctional center”) is closer in characteristics to an adult prison, holding teens with longer sentences.
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