

The Prison Library as Sanctuary: Using a Whole-Person Approach to Support Mental and Emotional Health of Incarcerated Women

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To Cite: Bultena, C. (2025). The prison library as sanctuary: Using a whole-person approach in prison libraries to support mental and emotional health in incarcerated women. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 5(1), 78-88. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder110>

Abstract

Prison library services in both federal and provincial correctional institutions across Canada are inconsistent, largely underfunded and understaffed. There is limited data around current prison library services which impacts the ability to plan future correctional library services. This research is intended to identify this information gap and aid in future modeling of correctional library services. This research will also examine how libraries can employ a holistic framework to support the mental health and wellbeing of women experiencing incarceration. Additionally, this paper will explore how prison libraries can be decolonial spaces within a carceral context, to act in part as vehicles of reconciliation and attempt to uniquely address the gross over-representation of Indigenous peoples in the Canadian justice system. Through employing a holistic framework and offering library spaces and services that support mental health and emotional health, prison libraries have the potential to transform lives and in a small way pursue reconciliation.

Keywords: Whole person librarianship, Indigenous Knowledge framework, prison library, prisoner well-being

In the “National guide for institutional libraries” the Correctional Service of Canada (2012) states that the purpose of a correctional library is to provide access to a broad variety of information. All inmates should have equal access to these services however, the access to information and educational opportunities in prison libraries varies widely

on federal, provincial, and individual level (Correctional Service of Canada, 2012). Little is known about how well prison libraries across Canada currently carry out this function since there is limited research published on Canadian prison libraries (Curry et al., 2003). Additionally, government and academic literature in Canada rarely mention prison libraries (Curry et al., 2003).

This literature review will examine the current research on prison conditions and show the common issues facing incarcerated Canadian women and Indigenous peoples. It will also examine the documented benefits of prison library services with a focus on the research surrounding prison library services in Canada, as well as the current state of these libraries within Canada. This literature review will also examine and highlight the unique traumas and issues faced by women with a focus on Indigenous women in Canada. Additionally, this literature review will critically examine current Canadian prison library service models and contrast to a whole-person approach to library services, drawing on the similarities between whole-person librarianship and Indigenous Knowledges. Lastly, this literature review will propose that holistic librarianship through an Indigenous lens, should be modeled to address both the unique traumas that women face as a vehicle for Indigenous reconciliation. Since there is a significant gap of compiled data on prison libraries in Canada, this literature review also includes information on prison libraries outside of a Canadian context since many of the challenges incarcerated individuals face are universal (in addition to the benefits of the services found in prisons).

The State of Prison Libraries in Canada

Current prison library models are based on public library models (Correctional Service of Canada, 2012). It is well established that access to educational opportunities while incarcerated reduces recidivism rates (Correctional Service of Canada, 2012). However, when compared to standard prisoner education, prison libraries are better situated to support the overall well-being of incarcerated individuals (Garner, 2019). The Correctional Service of Canada (2012), states that “library services should be provided to all inmates.” Although a majority of minimum and medium security institutions in Canada have interlibrary loan services, the library services between

institutions are not standardized (Agostini, 2022). At the provincial and federal level, prison libraries are still vastly understaffed, with large variances in both service availability and access (Agostini, 2022). This is due to gaps in both Canadian prison library policy, as well as the prison culture in Canada (Agostini, 2022). Prisons are viewed as a site of “perpetual punishment and trauma,” with access to library services being perceived as privilege for good behaviour rather than a fundamental human right (Agostini, 2022).

With the lack of reliable data regarding prison libraries in Canada, existing details are found in a 1984 mail-out survey to Canadian prison libraries (Ings & Joslin, 2011). The 1984 survey was sent to all 51 of the correctional institutions that are operated through the Correctional Service of Canada (Ings & Joslin, 2011). From the 28 responses received, 27 institutions reported having some sort of permanent library collection (Ings & Joslin, 2011). This implies that nearly half of the institutions surveyed may not have a correctional library and that less than one third correctional institutions have professional library staff (Ings & Joslin, 2011). Though the data from the survey is over 30 years old, Ings and Joslin (2011) conclude that though libraries have made progress in some areas, “prison libraries in Canada have not yet reached the staffing, funding, and program levels recommended back in the 1980s.” These findings are problematic, especially in light of the Correctional Service of Canada (2012) documentation outlining standards around prison library access in federal correctional institutions, and the assertion that equal library access should be prioritized for incarcerated individuals.

The Scope and Context of Incarcerated Individuals in Canada

Canada faces gross Indigenous over-representation of incarcerated individuals both on a federal and provincial level (Tetrault, 2022). Indigenous individuals account for between 30% to 45% of the prison population, despite representing only 5% of the overall Canadian population (Tetrault, 2022). Overrepresentation is higher among Indigenous women when compared to Indigenous men (Tetrault, 2022). Additionally, it is noteworthy that women in particular face a unique subset of challenges compared to incarcerated men. Not only do over 75% of incarcerated women in Canada have

children, most also have lives marked by “lifelong experiences of abuse, poverty, mental illness, addictions, lack of social supports, and unhealthy relationships” (Brown et al., 2019).

There are numerous complexities that contribute to this overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in prisons. They include (but are not limited to): the effects of colonial policies, intergenerational trauma, and a loss of cultural identity which furthers the detrimental effects on Indigenous communities (Tetrault, 2022). Current government structures exacerbate these issues and continue to separate families, with many critics arguing that the Canadian government’s policies have created a direct route from foster care to the prison system (APTN News, 2018).

The Unique Challenges and Traumas of Incarcerated Women

Though it is undeniable that incarceration impacts all individuals, women have a unique set of challenges compared to that of incarcerated men, particularly regarding their loss of control over their fertility as well as reduced mothering capacity (Bucerius et al., 2021, p. 520). Different studies have also shown that compared to the general prison population, incarcerated women disproportionately struggle with drug use, mental health issues, and disordered eating (Annison, 2019).

In Canada, a study that examined the daily lives of 88 women in the federal prison system found that incarcerated women viewed prisons as a safe place, where they could be temporarily unburdened from the “immediate stresses of securing subsistence-level necessities outside of prison” (Bucerius et al., 2021, p. 531). The study showed that prison is also seen by many women as a place of opportunity for reconnecting with family members (Bucerius et al., 2021). Since a majority of incarcerated women have lost custody of their children, incarceration allowed them to begin the “personal, organizational and legal processes required to reconnect with their children” (Bucerius et al., 2021, p. 531).

In that same study, between 74% to 81% of women who were interviewed indicated previous incidents of sexual or physical assault (Bucerius et al., 2021).

Furthermore, some of the women also said that they relied on street drugs to help them stay awake and avoid rape or other sexual abuse (Bucerius et al., 2021). Because of lives that often include drug use, victimization, and isolation from family and community, many women see prison as a refuge and an antithesis to these challenges. This points to major issues in Canada's social system, with many women using prison as a method of obtaining basic social services (Bucerius et al., 2021). This information should not paint prison in a positive light however, but rather emphasize the severe lack of access to societal resources in Canada.

Furthermore, the gross overrepresentation of Indigenous women in the Canadian carceral system contributes to an ongoing cycle of victimization, criminalization, and incarceration (VCI), also known as the VCI cycle (Grekul, 2020, p. 7). Mothers who are incarcerated are inevitably separated from their children, perpetuating the trauma of family separation, and setting children on their own VCI cycle (Grekul, 2020, p.7). However, it is incredibly difficult for incarcerated mothers to maintain contact with their children during incarceration, due in part to the locations of prisons (Brown et al., 2019, p. 204). Most Canadian federal prisons are located hundreds or thousands of kilometers away from homes and communities (Brown et al., 2019, p. 204).

Prison Libraries as Sanctuaries of Autonomy and Connection

There is a growing body of evidence that shows that providing library resources and services reduces the stress of those who are incarcerated, which contributes to positive mental health benefits (Garner, 2019). Prison libraries also enhance the mental and emotional health of incarcerated individuals through supporting their personal autonomy, reinforcing positive behavioral choices, and by providing a therapeutic space (Garner, 2019).

To support a prisoner's autonomy, choice is a vital aspect of prison libraries. Because inmates are not forced to visit the library, it is often seen differently from other attempts at prison reform (Finlay & Bates, 2019). Prison libraries allow for self-directed study and free-range learning which combats the idea that only those in charge in correctional institutions know what is best for inmates. Ultimately, the prison library may symbolize freedom to those who use it (Lilienthal, 2013, p. 28).

The prison library also supports positive behavioural choices through alleviating boredom and moderating other destructive behaviours (Garner, 2019). Attempts at alleviating boredom often result in a pursuit of criminal activity (often drug-related), which often leads to further criminal activity (Garner, 2019). Reading for escapism has been cited as a constructive way to mitigate boredom, with stories helping inmates frame their own experiences and make sense of their own lives (Finlay & Bates, 2019).

Just as importantly, a physical library space acts as a therapeutic space that directly encourages relaxation and reduces stress (Garner, 2019). One inmate in an Australian study acknowledged that “she chooses to visit her library when she is feeling stressed or anxious because the experience of being in the library helps her feel better” (Garner, 2019, p. 349). Additionally, a former Australian inmate speaks fondly of his experience with prison libraries:

“To this day, it is the most poorly resourced library I have ever seen, but it was still a refuge in an otherwise bleak world. For half an hour a day I didn’t have to listen to screaming, threats and cursing that reminded me of my childhood, but more importantly, there were still more books on the shelves than I could hope to read in several months” (Linnane, 2021, p.319).

Adopting a Whole Person Approach

In Canada, since incarcerated individuals lack access to information and technology, prison libraries are the only reprieve from the tedium of daily existence (Agostini, 2022). The physical library space is a place where inmates can go to distract themselves from their emotions (Garner, 2019, p. 351). It is also only one of the few places in prison where they can feel welcome (Garner, 2019, p. 351).

Because of this, prison libraries that employ a whole person approach to correctional library services are situated to support the psychological and emotional health of women through offering a safe physical space to decrease anxiety, increasing self-esteem through educational opportunities and autonomy, and reducing the trauma of separation from their children through implementing library programming that focuses on restoring women to their culture and to their families (Garner, 2019).

With research showing that children are deeply affected by their mother's incarceration, organizing family story times encourages connections to family and culture which supports the bond between mother and child (Brown et al., 2019). Though story time (often called Read to Me) programs vary, they generally involve a recording of an incarcerated parent reading a book, often with a copy of both the book and the recording sent to the incarcerated parent's child(ren) (The Seattle Public Library Foundation, n.d.). These programs aim to strengthen or maintain the family bond while the parent is incarcerated, as well as attempt to mitigate the trauma that the child(ren) experience due to the missing parent (The Seattle Public Library Foundation, n.d.). Mother-child read aloud programs have shown many advantages, such as maintaining the mother-child bond (Brown et al., 2019). In fact, one child wrote that “by listening to her voice, I felt like she was close by” (Brown et al., 2019, p. 208). These narratives and benefits to prison libraries and their roles in society are needed to truly understand the role that prison libraries play in the lives of those who are incarcerated (Finlay & Bates, 2019).

Indigenous Knowledge Methods and Whole-Person Librarianship

Though distinct, whole person librarianship and Indigenous knowledge practices contain some similarities. Whole person librarianship supports a holistic view of wellness through autonomy, therapeutic space, and as a way to occupy time in a constructive way (Garner, 2019). Comparatively, Indigenous Knowledge practices center relationality: a concept that centers radical love and accountability to “kin, land, stories, places, patrons, and library materials in the work of Indigenous librarianship” (Littletree et al., 2020, p. 416). This can make imprisonment particularly re-traumatizing for Indigenous individuals, as they are separate from their land, culture, and kin. Indigenous ways of knowing are characterized by “living in an Indigenous way”, through “talking, story, singing, and teaching”, and through “making art, fashioning tools and weapons” (Littletree et al., 2020, p. 416). Both views highlight the mental and emotional benefit of connection to place and to story. Particularly in prison libraries, approaching library service with a combination of whole person librarianship and Indigenous ways of knowing is both possible and beneficial.

There are also similarities surrounding choice between Indigenous knowledge and whole person librarianship. Just as whole person librarianship centers choice and personal autonomy as a way of practicing “responsibility for self” (Garner, 2019), Indigenous knowledge methods acknowledge that “coercing participation in Indigenous programming and forcing identity upon Indigenous individuals in custody is oppressive” (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 541). Both approaches acknowledge the oppression that arises from a lack of autonomy and the complex process of “claiming one’s identity” (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 541).

The Aboriginal Women Offender Correctional Program (AWOCP) in Canada is the first correctional program model that boasts a holistic and Indigenous approach (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 539). The model focuses on a “circle of care” that prioritizes “healing through cultural identity” and encompasses “a life-long spiritual, emotional and/or psychological journey whereby one strives to be in harmony with all living things on Mother Earth” (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 539). This is similar to whole-person librarianship which strives to center “meaning-making, mindfulness, healing, and as supporters of wellbeing” (Gardner, 2019, p. 343). Indigenous healing strives to incorporate “telling of stories, sharing of traditional teachings and participation in sacred ceremonies serve to assist the individual in following the Red Road to healing” (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 539). Individuals who embark on this journey are seen and deemed to be “whole in body, mind, spirit, emotions and behaviour” (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 539). Indigenous individuals who have participated in cultural healing programs have stated that it has allowed them to “reconnect to their cultural heritage” and that through learning traditional teachings and ceremonies, they feel “re-born” (Hyatt, 2019, p. 191). Though distinctly different, both Indigenous healing and whole person librarianship view healing as a holistic endeavour that encompasses the mind, body and soul of the individual, prioritizing and acknowledging the value and worth of the human experience.

Conclusion

Whole person librarianship is a beneficial way for prison libraries to support incarcerated individuals' mental and emotional well-being. In Canada, both prison libraries and the data surrounding them remain under-realized, under-utilized, and under-funded. Though the deprivations and challenges to incarceration are well-documented, there remains a lack of information about how prison libraries can combat these deprivations. With the gross over-representation of Indigenous individuals (particularly women) in the Canadian penal system, prison libraries are uniquely situated to act as vehicles of healing and reconciliation. Whole person librarianship uses a holistic model that has much in common with Indigenous approaches to knowledge. Incorporating both of these theoretical frameworks into the prison library system in Canada will be beneficial to both society as a whole and to the incarcerated individuals that the libraries serve.

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