

Motive and Opportunity: Serving Teens in the Correctional System

PATRICK JONES

In a recent survey conducted by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and the website smartgirl.com about teens and reading, the majority of survey respondents reported (72 percent) they like to read for pleasure when they have time.¹ One might therefore conclude that not having enough time is a major obstacle to teens reading more. The hectic schedule of teen life coupled with the plethora of recreational choices often leaves little time for reading. But there is one group of teens who have a very rigid schedule and few choices: teens in corrections. Teens in the correctional systems have lots of time to read. This is a group of teens who provide libraries with unique opportunities to do outreach.²

But while teens in corrections have time for reading, many of them lack skills. Speaking at the 2003 American Library Association (ALA) conference, Vibeke Lehmann, the library services coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, noted that 40 percent of prison inmates in the United States are illiterate. The cycle is easy to see and hard to stop. People who end up in prison often became engaged in illegal acts as teens. While there are hundreds of reasons, it is clear that many became engaged in crime because they were not engaged in school. Again, a hundred reasons, but many don't engage in school because they don't do well. They don't do well because they can't read well. They can't read well because they never learned, didn't have positive early literacy experiences, were not raised in print-rich environments, and never learned the value in reading for educational reasons, let alone as a recreational activity.

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Yet teens in corrections do value recreational reading, if they have access to reading materials that meet their interests and are on their reading level. Meeting those interests is not as easy as it sounds. For while there are clear guidelines³ for library services to youth in corrections that embrace intellectual freedom, there is the reality of working with the correctional system. Any person in a correctional facility is deprived of certain liberties. So, a teen in corrections finds the facility acting *in loco parentis* and determining which materials are appropriate to be read.

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Naomi Angier, juvenile justice outreach librarian at the Multnomah Library in Portland, Oregon, spoke about this issue at ALA, as well, noting that censorship is a big problem when working with juvenile detention centers.⁴ In her work, she set up a review committee with the detention center staff, pulled the most controversial materials (street life novels by Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim) out of the collection, and instituted an age policy. By doing so, she has built up trust with the correctional staff; the review committee members only meet now if they have a specific book to discuss.

The Multnomah County example is instructive. In order to provide all teen inmates with access to a wide variety of material, the library had to prevent access to a few very specific materials for some residents. It is a compromise, but then most partnerships that libraries undertake require

accommodations to the rules and culture of the partner. Multnomah County's approach is rare as few other libraries serving correctional facilities have formal policies or procedures in place to provide library and corrections staffs with a forum to solve issues related to materials. If libraries want to partner with correctional facilities, then they must agree to support the goals and objectives of those institutions.

Despite those limitations, reading and reading promotion can thrive within juvenile correctional institutions. In addition to supplying books and magazines, many libraries promote reading in correctional settings by using techniques similar to those they would in a school setting, such as:

- booktalking,⁵
- book discussion groups,⁶
- book review programs,
- creative writing workshops,
- guidance programs,⁷
- poetry slams,
- read alouds,
- readers theater, and
- storytelling.

Because many teens in corrections are parents, libraries should be assertive about early literacy programs, such as Born to Read, that teach these young parents about the importance of reading to their children.

Despite obstacles, which are inherent to working in the correctional setting, there are plenty of books that teens will find of interest. Reading levels vary widely, as do interests – both impacted by demographics. Many libraries serving teens in corrections find that the majority of the inmate population is normally African American. Those teens that are not African American, however, often show a huge interest in similar reading materials. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, twenty of the most popular books or subjects with teens in corrections are:

1. *Always Running* by Luis Rodriquez
2. *Angry Blond* by Eminem
3. *Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley
4. *Babylon Boyz* by Jess Mowry
5. Books on calligraphy or origami
6. *Boondocks* comics by Aaron McGruder
7. *Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah
8. *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers
9. *Flyy Girl* by Omar Tyree
10. *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter
11. *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers
12. *No Disrespect* by Sister Souljah
13. Novels by African-American authors Eric Jerome Dickey or E. Lynn Harris
14. Novels by Jackie Collins, Sidney Sheldon, Stephen King, and Dean Koontz
15. *Push* by Sapphire
16. *Rose That Grew From Concrete* by Tupac Shakur (poetry)
17. *Simpsons* comics by Matt Groening

18. *Spawn*, *Blade*, *Akira*, and *X-Men* graphic novels
19. *Tupac Shakur* by Vibe Magazine
20. *Who Will Cry for the Little Boy* by Antwone Fisher

These are by no means the only books of interest to young men and women in the correctional system, but do represent a selection of the most popular. What is interesting is that there are few young adult problem novels, perhaps because the problems faced by fictional protagonists often pale in comparison with the hard real lives of teen offenders.

When working with teens in corrections, libraries have ample opportunities to demonstrate the value of reading. But to what end? What is our real motive? The core work of librarians isn't about books, but about building assets⁸ in young people. Reading for pleasure is one of the forty that kids need to succeed.⁹ The key research finding is this: the more assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of risky behaviors, and the more likely they are to engage in positive behaviors, such as reading for pleasure. Librarians want incarcerated teens, such as the one quoted below, to discover that:

"Never knew reading could be so fun. When I was out, I never did read a book. But now that you showed me how fun it can be, I'm going to read every book I can, not just 'cause of you. But because I really like reading and like to learn new things. Things I never knew."¹⁰

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