

Reaching Out to Young Adults in Jail

Patrick Jones

The term “outreach” is used to describe library services that take place outside of the library setting. Outreach normally refers to either a community relations function (promoting services) or actual service delivery. The decision to deliver a service outside of the library depends upon a variety of circumstances for both the library and the customer. For the library, the call is usually based on the belief that the delivery of service directly to the patron in their home, school, or other location is a more cost-effective way of reaching customers. For the customer, outreach is an answer when there are obstacles to physically visiting a library. For all teens, there are plenty of obstacles, such as transportation, blocking their path to a library. For a small group of teens, often ones in desperate need of reading materials and information, the obstacles are the bars on their jail cell.

Despite the ever-increasing number of teens serving time behind bars, few public libraries provide services to teens in juvenile correctional facilities (JCFs). A literature search revealed that forty-four public libraries were identified as providing some level of service to jailed teens. In the fall of 2003, these libraries were surveyed, and sixteen libraries (36 percent) responded to questions about the history of their services, the range of services offered, and restrictions on materials (see figure 1). The goal of the survey was to identify the “state of the art” for this type of service, with a particular

Patrick Jones is Manager, Outreach Department, Hennepin County Library, Minnesota. He also runs www.connectingya.com; a consulting firm dedicated to providing powerful youth services. In addition to several professional books, Jones published his first teen novel in 2004 (*Things Change* from Walker & Company).

focus on collection development issues. Intellectual freedom is always an issue in dealing with materials for teens; and in the correctional setting, it is perhaps the single largest concern facing any library serving JCFs.

While our professional values embrace intellectual freedom, there is the

“When libraries partner with correctional facilities, we must understand the need to support the goals of that institution, even if they may conflict with our values.”

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. When libraries partner with correctional facilities, we must understand the need to support the goals of that institution, even if they may conflict with our values. Our values don’t trump their values. When a correctional facility allows a library to provide a service, we are like any service provider, bound by the regulations of the facility.

The survey revealed a wide range of services and history of providing service, with some libraries just getting into the business while others (such as Hennepin County Library) have more than a decade of experience. The facilities also differ greatly, on the ranging from twenty-five to eight hundred prisoners, with an average of two hundred. The one constant was that the large majority of these prisoners were male. The ratio of ethnicities and races varied widely, from 75 percent white at one program to primarily Latino at another. The range of African-American populations ranged from 10 percent to 50 percent. While the demographics and economics vary, an incarcerated teen is an at-risk teen lacking in developmental assets.

The vast majority of services to JCFs

operate without a written service agreement, collection policy, or materials reconsideration procedure. Even though the majority of libraries embrace the Library Bill of Rights, all but two programs leave the final decision on removing materials with the JCF. Almost all of the services consist of more than drop-

ping off materials and allow for interaction with residents. Most of the services have funding (an average of \$6,000) for materials, but most also make use of donations and weeded materials. The one common element that every library surveyed providing services to teens in JCFs faces limitations on materials.

Format restrictions prevent almost half of libraries from providing magazines. Staples in magazines, as well as spiral-bound books, could be used as a weapon against correctional officers and other residents, or used as an instrument of self-injury. Only a few libraries reported not being able to supply hard-back books (again, safety concerns), but every single library surveyed reported restrictions on materials due to content. The materials most commonly prohibited were:

- *Anarchist Cookbook* or similar
- *High Times* magazine or similar
- Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim street life novels
- *Vibe*, *Source*, or similar magazines
- Sex instruction books
- *Body Art Book*, *Tattoo* magazine, or similar
- *Low Rider* or similar magazines
- *Godfather* and other Mafia books
- *Helter Skelter* and other true crime
- Martial arts instruction or similar
- *Monster, Do or Die, My Bloody Life*,

and other gang stories

While the survey did not pose the question, anecdotally we learned that most libraries also don't provide erotica or sexually explicit materials.

Even those libraries that "on paper" face few restrictions find the reality quite different. One librarian noted that "there is a guard from the facility who accompanies the patrons, and the guard (usually) examines each item and denies those that they don't feel are appropriate." Another commented that "we have had several instances in which a resident will request a book, we bring it, and it is taken from the resident by a staff member who personally disagrees with the material."

Almost all of the survey respondents expressed similar frustration in working with correctional officers whose "world view" is so different. Librarians are paid to provide free access to information; correctional officers are paid to work in an environment where freedom is limited.

So, is it worth it? The experience of the Hennepin County Library certainly proves that the payoffs far outweigh the frustration and professional compromises. The library has a long history of outreach to correctional facilities, all of which were combined into an Outreach Department in 1974. In the late 1980s, however, budget issues forced the libraries to eliminate a full-time juvenile correctional librarian. Despite that, services to teens in corrections remained strong, utilizing other outreach staff to include biweekly visits by staff to the library created at the eighty-seven-bed Juvenile Detention Center. The library also provides library materials ("cottage collections") to teens incarcerated at the County Home School (CHS). CHS is a correctional treatment facility for boys and girls from the ages of twelve to eighteen. Both facilities are units of the County's Community Corrections Department.

In early 2002, the library obtained grant funds to further the award-winning Great Transitions program already in place at CHS. Great Transitions is a collaborative project of Hennepin County

Tucson-Puma Public Library	Ariz.
Fresno County Library	Calif.
San Francisco Public Library	Calif.
Allen County Library	Ind.
Anderson Public Library	Ind.
Monroe County Public Library	Ind.
Johnson County Library	Kans.
Hennepin County Library	Minn.
Rochester Public Library	Minn.
Mid-York Public Library	N.Y.
Akron-Summit Public Library	Ohio
Multnomah County Library	Ore.
Dallas Public Library	Tex.
Fort Worth Public Library	Tex.
Austin Public Library	Tex.
Laramie County Public Library	Wyo.

Figure 1. Survey Participants

Library in cooperation with Hennepin County Home School, Epsilon School, and Minneapolis Public Library. Using these grant funds, the library was able to offer students at CHS:

- A Born to Read program for teen mothers and fathers
- A creative writing workshop
- An author visit (YA writer Will Weaver)
- Book discussion groups
- Monthly booktalks held in classrooms monthly
- Creation of a 5,000-item library and twice-monthly visits by library staff
- Information literacy instruction
- Library card sign-up and fine waiver
- Publication of a literary magazine (*Diverse City*)

Many of these programs had been offered in the past at CHS, but these grant funds allowed them to be planned, implemented, and evaluated as a total package.

After the completion of all programs, the library conducted a survey of CHS residents to measure the impact of the various Great Transitions programs upon their reading attitudes and behaviors. The major findings were:

- A majority of CHS residents believe they will be more likely to use public and school libraries upon release than they did before entering CHS

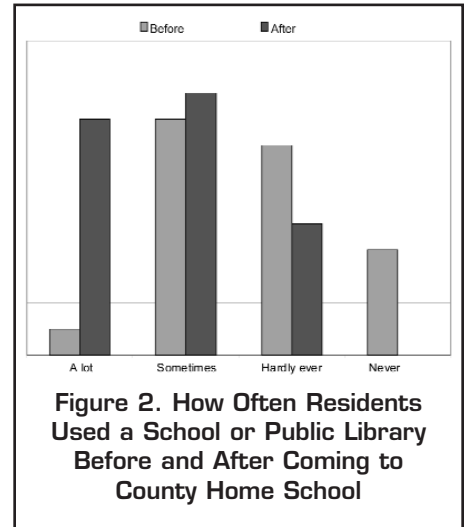


Figure 2. How Often Residents Used a School or Public Library Before and After Coming to County Home School

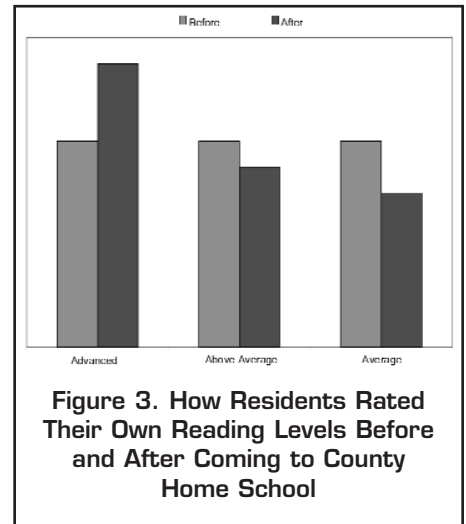


Figure 3. How Residents Rated Their Own Reading Levels Before and After Coming to County Home School

(see figure 2)

- Several CHS residents believe their reading level has increased while at CHS (see figure 3)
- A majority of CHS residents believe they have a more positive attitude about reading than before entering CHS (see figure 4)
- The majority of CHS residents are reading more while at CHS than before they entered (see figure 5)
- Visiting the new CHS library was the favorite activity of CHS residents, followed by reading books supplied by the library and located in their cottage (see figure 6)

Residents also readily supplied information about the best books (see sidebar) they have obtained from the library and

read during their stay at CHS. While teens at CHS indicated they would continue reading upon release, we don't have any way to measure the lasting effect of our work with these challenged young people.

If we look at outreach from the view-

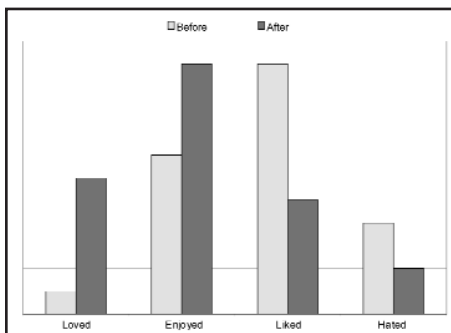


Figure 4. How Residents Describe Their View of Reading Before and After Coming to County Home School

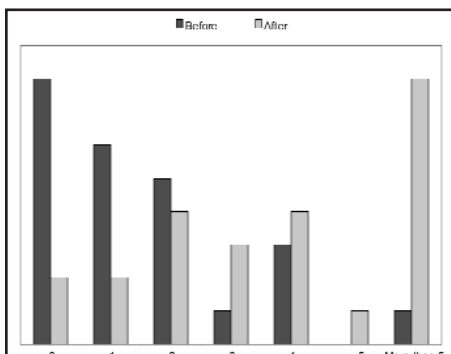


Figure 5. Number of Books Residents Read per Month Before and After Coming to County Home School

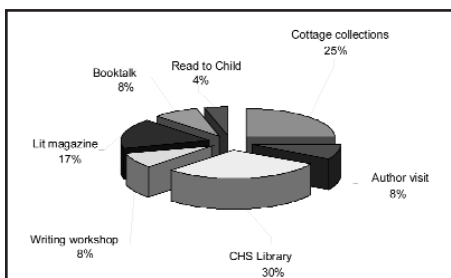


Figure 6. How Residents Describe Their View of Reading Before and After Coming to County Home School

point of "old school" library statistical measures, services to kids in corrections don't make a great deal of sense. The loss rate for materials is high, the time spent setting up services is great, and the return on the circulation bottom line is low. But, if we think about outcomes rather than outputs, then programs like these are an obvious choice for any library actively engaging in building community. These programs also represent a new direction in teen services where the focus is not

only on what services libraries provide young adults but, just as importantly, on the outcomes of those services. Our focus needs to be on assets—not library resources, but on a positive youth development approach.

Focusing on positive youth development represents a vision of looking outside of the walls of the library, not only for the usual suspects of collaboration or outreach, but looking at what value our services have in the lives of teenagers. The

"Best Book" Read by Students at County Home School

Dickinson, Peter. *The Rope Maker*. When the magic that protects their Valley starts to fail, Tilja and her companions journey into the evil Empire to find the ancient magician Faheel, who originally cast those spells.

Draper, Sharon. *Romiette and Julio*. An African-American girl and a Latino boy fall in love after meeting on the Internet, but they are harassed by a gang that objects to their interracial dating.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Classic Greek epic poem recounts the tale of a hero's journey home.

LaHaye, Tim. *Left Behind*. This fictional account of life after the Rapture delivers an urgent call to today's readers to prepare their own hearts and minister to others.

Moore, Yani. *Triple Take*. Jonathan "JC" Cole is about to get out of the joint, and he has one thing on his mind—revenge against the three men who betrayed him to save their own skins.

Mosley, Walter. *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*. Easy Rawlins is out of the investigation business, but when an old friend gets in enough trouble to ask for Easy's help, he finds he can't refuse.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Slam*. Seventeen-year-old "Slam" Harris is counting on his basketball talents to get him out of the inner city and give him a chance to succeed in life, but his coach sees things differently.

Pelzer, David. *A Child Called It*. Dave Pelzer shares his unforgettable story of the many abuses he suffered at the hands of his alcoholic mother and the averted eyes of his neglectful father.

Roberts, Katherine. *Spellfall*. Natalie and her friends are caught up in a sorcerer's attempt to cross an invisible boundary in order to invade another world.

Rock, Chris. *Rock This*. Chris Rock confronts all the hot-button issues, such as finding a black leader, addiction to bubble wrap, why white folks can't say the N-word, the dirty socks rule, marriage, Bill Clinton, sexual harassment, and more.

Sachar, Louis. *Holes*. Stanley Yelnats is sent to a hellish correctional camp in the Texas desert where he finds his first real friend, a treasure, and a new sense of himself.

Sapphire. *Push*. This is a self-portrait of an unloved black teenage girl with a father who rapes her and a jealous mother who screams abuse.

Shaukur, Tupac. *Rose That Grew From Concrete*. This collection of more than 100 poems honestly and artfully confronts topics ranging from poverty and motherhood to Van Gogh and Mandela.

Souljah, Sister. *The Coldest Winter Ever*. After a black drug dealer goes to jail in Brooklyn, his ruthless seventeen-year-old daughter takes over his empire.

question no longer asks what a young adult does in a library or as part of an outreach, but also asks what happens to that young adult as a result of checking

“While the demographics and economics vary, the constant is that an incarcerated teen is an at-risk teen lacking in developmental assets.”

out a book, attending a book discussion program, having their creativity tapped, or learning how to locate information on the Internet. Librarians want incarcerated teens, such as this young man from the County Home School, to discover that:

“I 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.”

Author’s note: Thanks to Keven Larson (Hennepin County Library) for his assistance in conducting, compiling,

and reporting the results of the JCF survey. ●

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Angier, Naomi, and Katies O’Dell. “The Book Group behind Bars,” *Voice of Youth Advocates* 23, no. 5 (Dec. 2000): 331–33.

Angier, Naomi, Rebecca Cohen, and Jill Morrison. “Juvenile Justice Outreach: Library Services at Detention Centers,” *PNLA Quarterly* 66, no. 1

(Fall 2001): 16.

Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies. *Library Standards for Juvenile Correctional Facilities*. Chicago: Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, ALA, 1999.

Herald, Diana Tixier. “Booktalking to a Captive Audience,” *School Library Journal* 41 (May 1995): 35–36.

Glunt, Cynthia. “Guidance to Go,” *School Library Journal* 41 (Oct. 1995): 56.

“Great Transitions,” in *Excellence in Library Services to Young Adults: The Nation’s Top Programs*. Edited by Mary K. Chelton. Chicago: ALA, 2000.

Madenski, Melissa. “Books behind Bars,” *School Library Journal* 47, no. 7 (July 2001): 40.