

## **Prison Libraries Network: The Right to Read**

For inmates in Canadian correctional institutions, reading and access to information is a rare connection to the outside world.

It is also a basic right.

The Prison Libraries Network asserts that incarcerated Canadians do not relinquish the rights and freedoms guaranteed to them under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In fact, certain freedoms, such as those of conscience and religion, thought, belief, opinion, and expression have a heightened importance behind bars.

The Canadian Library Association's Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries asserts that Canadians' right to access information is essential to be able to advance themselves through literacy, lifelong learning, social engagement, and cultural enrichment. Prison libraries play a fundamental role in guaranteeing rights, not only by providing inmates with access to information about their legal rights as incarcerated persons, but also by providing the tools necessary to exercise these rights.

We call upon prison libraries to actively promote literacy as a continuum of learning that assists and allows incarcerated individuals to develop knowledge and potential, to achieve goals, and to participate fully in wider society. This literacy should be expanded to include skills to access knowledge through technology.

Prison libraries must be given the space necessary to provide access to collections and library programs that meet inmates' recreational, cultural, educational and other information needs. As is required of them as supporters of intellectual freedom and access to information, prison libraries must provide inmates with the widest variety of materials possible, including access to legal materials. Collections and programming in prison libraries must also reflect the increase in the composition of ethnically and culturally diverse prisoner populations. Library professionals are central to the prison library mandate.

In addition, Canadian prisons must acknowledge their key role within a social and political system of ongoing colonialism. Indigenous peoples make up a percentage of the incarcerated population far higher than their proportion of Canada's general population – and the numbers of Indigenous peoples who are incarcerated continues to grow. Within this context, and at the request of Indigenous inmates, prison libraries have a responsibility to provide access to resources on Indigenous histories, cultures and languages, to books by Indigenous authors, and to materials about the impacts – and related healing processes – of colonialism.

The *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* states that all prisons in Canada must provide a range of programs to assist in the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates. In accordance, Commissioner's Directive 720 of the Correctional Service of Canada stipulates that prisons have the responsibility to provide inmates with access to

library services. The Commissioner's Directive also states that federal institutions should have access to library services that are similar to those offered in the community. By fulfilling this objective, prison libraries – and their counterparts in the community - can contribute to safer and healthier communities. This highlights an important function of the prison library: to mirror the “outside” world and help prepare inmates for release.

There is conclusive evidence of direct links between access to rehabilitative programs and lower rates of recidivism. When inmates' information rights are respected, their ability to grow positive connections both inside and outside of the prison setting grows. This area of personal growth helps to prepare them for their release. Outside of prisons, libraries in the community can play a critical role in supporting the successful reintegration of former inmates.

Correctional institutions are made better by the programs and information sharing opportunities that prison libraries provide. The vast majority of inmates held in Canadian correctional facilities will be released back into our communities with the potential of inmates to contribute to society as people with ideas, skills, and lived experiences. The provision of robust library services to inmates not only helps maintain basic rights, but also allows members of this population to explore their fullest potential.

- Prison Libraries Network  
Canadian Library Association  
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While this statement references Commissioner Directive 720 governing federal institutions, the Prisoners' Right to Read is also applicable to provincial jurisdictional institutions.

The thoughts expressed in this statement are supported by many internationally adopted declarations regarding the inmate's right to read. These include the *United Nations Standard Minimal Rules for the treatment of Prisoners (1955)*, the *Charter of the Reader (1994)*, and the *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1995)*.

And from the Canadian Library Association:  
*Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries*, September 2015  
([http://www.cla.ca/wp-content/uploads/CLA\\_Intellectual\\_Freedom\\_Position\\_Stmt\\_27sept2015\\_ltrhd.pdf](http://www.cla.ca/wp-content/uploads/CLA_Intellectual_Freedom_Position_Stmt_27sept2015_ltrhd.pdf))

And the CLA's position statement on the *Fundamental Right of People who are Incarcerated to Read, Learn and Access Information*, September 2014