



## IJIDI: Book Review

Austin, J. (2022). *Library services and incarceration: Recognizing barriers, strengthening access*. ALA Neal-Schuman.

ISBN: 9780838949450. 208 pp. \$54.99 US.

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Keywords: incarceration, information access, jail, juvenile detention, prison

Publication Type: book review

**D**r. Jeanie Austin's excellent new book, *Library Services and Incarceration: Recognizing Barriers, Strengthening Access*, is a vital addition to any library and information science (LIS) graduate education curriculum and is pertinent for professional development. Intended for all types of librarians and those preparing to enter the field, the book urges readers to grapple with their complicit agency within the matrix of mass incarceration and policing, particularly in the U.S. An extensive review of the literature, in combination with real-world examples, elucidates the practical how-to and critical theory underpinnings of providing library services and information access to previously and currently incarcerated citizens—as well as their support networks.

*Library Services and Incarceration* employs multidisciplinary perspectives on the intersectionalities between equity, social justice, and information while situating library services in the “historically prioritized white, middle-class, and hetero- and gender-normative modes of conduct and ways of knowing” (p. 97). Austin stresses that various voices, experiences, and perspectives must be considered. Of particular note to readers interested in diversity and inclusion is Austin's extensive analysis that explores the impact of mass incarceration on Black, Indigenous, all People Of Color, LGBTQIA+ (especially transgender people), people who are detained in immigrant detention facilities, and people who are living in poverty or “live their lives in public” and is thus “always positioned as criminal or likely to be criminalized by the state, and thus more likely to be surveilled, policed, and incarcerated” (p. 49). The book is published by ALA Neal-Schuman, whose materials fund advocacy, awareness, and accreditation programs for library professionals worldwide; however, the book is not necessarily relevant to international readers, as its scope is focused on the U.S.

Austin (they/them/their) is a Jail and Reentry Services librarian with the San Francisco Public Library (California, USA) and earned their Ph.D. in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA). They write from a well-researched, field-experienced perspective. Thus, *Library Services and Incarceration* can sometimes read like a dissertation—primarily due to the robust literature review. While the



tome can feel like a textbook, complete with case studies, it is an inviting read that never feels like a slog, although specific points are reiterated a few times, too many. Still, at just over 150 pages of main text, the book packs a ton of information into a concise and manageable volume.

*Library Services and Incarceration* aims to provide a new framework for thinking through disparate and intertwining themes related to carceral systems and information access and to envision new forms of access, collaboration, and programming by drawing on current models. One of Austin's main points is that, historically, incarceration has been viewed through a punitive versus rehabilitative lens. However, the reality of incarceration is less binary and is messier, more complex, and labyrinthine in its navigation. Austin purports that access to information is a human right, and librarians should actively advocate for information services to the incarcerated because they are part of society's patron base, despite being forcibly removed from the public sphere. Austin emphasizes that incarcerated citizens know their information needs best and should be part of the information searching and literacy process. They remind us that the incarcerated are information producers and content creators.

The book begins with a foreword by the esteemed Kathleen de la Peña McCook, followed by Austin's introduction, then eight chapters broken into two sections by an interlude, a conclusion, two appendices that include bibliographies of library literature on adult and youth incarceration, and an index. Chapter One provides extensive theoretical and historical background on mass incarceration in the U.S. and rehabilitative versus punitive approaches. A history of library services to the incarcerated is provided in Chapter Two. Chapter Three describes various forms of incarceration, notably expanding the traditional definition of prisons to include community supervision (e.g., parole), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention, and "cases of facilities in the U.S. that have been intentionally obscured by local, state, or federal bodies" (p. 52). Chapter Four, "Information and Incarceration," provides a detailed literature review from 1992-2019, the year of the most recent version of the American Library Association's (ALA) Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies' (ASCLA) "Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions". The book discovers that, while previously, librarians' and libraries' roles have been either punitive or rehabilitative, as demonstrated in the literature, in recent years, there is an emphasis away from that binary and a move towards the librarian's role in providing information access to the incarcerated as a means for them to maintain a sense of agency and sense of self over time.

As mentioned, the eight chapters are broken into two halves via a section between chapters 4 and 5 (interlude) called "Information Interstices: Technologies and Flows of Power." The main points endorsed in this interlude section include: 1) technology access marketed as free is often accessed at a cost—for example, inmates paying to read on an iPad loaded with free books; 2) technologies are often used to replace in-person access, rather than expand it; and 3), technology provides opportunities for further surveillance of incarcerated individuals and groups, such as by contributing data for algorithmic refinement.

Chapter Five presents a selection of existing direct service models, including specific sections: prison libraries, public libraries, and collection development. Chapter Six focuses on indirect service models, including reference by mail, book donations, interlibrary loans, and access to online, e-materials, and social connections via technology. Chapter Seven, "Reentry Support and Programming," provides excellent examples and advice on re-entry

support, particularly for transgender individuals. It also includes a three-paged Q&A interview with a county Outreach Librarian, which is an odd choice as it deviates starkly from the formatting of the rest of the book. In chapter seven, information starts to be repeated from earlier chapters. Chapter Eight is the most practical and instructional section, covering concerns specific to librarians, such as building institutional support, managing circulation records, developing collections, nurturing partnerships, seeking funding, and engaging in reflective praxis.

*Library Services and Incarceration* is a welcome introductory overview for librarians, library science students, and LIS practitioners on library services to incarcerated populations. Austin delivers on their promise to provide critical theoretical insight and practical information related to information access for incarcerated citizens. One area where the book falls short is Austin's argument that the publication is intended for all types of librarians, including specialized and academic librarians. However, throughout the book, the focus is on prison and public library services. A likely reason for this oversight is that academic and special librarians are much less involved in library services for incarcerated populations. However, it would have been beneficial for Austin to provide some ideas for how and *why* academic and special libraries, *in particular*, should make an effort to become more involved in this area of library services.

Austin contends that it is time for U.S.-based librarians and LIS programs to turn their attention toward mass incarceration, moving the topic from the fringe to the center of our discourse, and I agree. While studying for my master's degree, I participated in a field site visit to a prison library as an extracurricular event organized by my library school's Special Library Association Student Chapter. The prison library was assumed to be niche, and I recall no other coverage of library services for the incarcerated in my LIS education.

As a reviewer, I feel compelled to share a personal detail that helps situate me as the reviewer of this book. Due to a misunderstanding, when I was a teenager, I spent one day incarcerated. I came to this book as a highly privileged person as I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual U.S. citizen and did not grow up in a community that was heavily policed. That one afternoon I spent incarcerated with zero access to information felt incredibly dehumanizing—not to mention mind-numbingly tiresome. Factors entirely outside my control—my race, gender identity, and the financial circumstances I was born into—allowed me to exit the criminal justice system quickly, but many are not so lucky. For a long time, I've been aware that had I not been white, had my family been unable to post bail, or any other factors, my experience could have snowballed from an inconvenience to incarceration with lifelong negative repercussions. After reading Austin's book, I look forward to continuing these discussions with my LIS colleagues, to whom I will recommend this book.

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book clubs, including an intersectional feminist project that aims to make academic work more accessible to the public. For more information about Ms. Valerie Brett Shaindlin, visit her website at [valeriebrett.com](http://valeriebrett.com).

