

Information Justice Institute: Initiating a Project to Increase Critical Understanding and Community Engagement

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Abstract

The Information Justice Institute (IJI) is a project developed at Chicago State University (CSU) in collaboration with community partners. The project brings librarians and community members together to consider key topics and questions to build understanding around critical community needs. This paper reports on two key activities undertaken during the project's initial phase. First, the preliminary results of a survey launched in 2021 aim to understand the current involvement and potential needs of librarians and other library affiliates in terms of social justice engagement, particularly those related to serving incarcerated people/recently released and their support networks. Second, a webliography developed to support librarians and other community members in growing understanding, strategies, and initiatives to serve diverse populations confronting onerous systemic challenges (e.g., incarceration, poverty, etc.), which are experienced in tandem with limited opportunities for information access and use. The IJI collaboration encouraged dialogue focused on posing questions and grappling with complex issues to grow insights and serve the needs of incarcerated/recently released people and their support networks. This work will likely interest librarians, educators, community leaders, and others working toward justice.

Keywords: collaboration; community; incarceration; re-entry; survey

Publication Type: case study

Introduction

The Information Justice Institute (IJI) is a project hosted by Chicago State University (CSU) in the United States. Our primary focus is to consider how libraries work against injustice and to inform and enhance practice grounded in social justice. IJI has been developing to encourage collaboration between libraries and other community-based organizations concerned with supporting those entangled in systems of injustice. This work is situated in the United States, which struggles with alarming violence rates while having the world's highest incarceration rate (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). Key project activities discussed in this paper include a survey and a webliography. The survey was launched in 2021 to understand current trends in involvement and potential needs of librarians and other library affiliates in terms of social justice engagement, particularly those related to serving incarcerated people, as well as those recently released and their support networks. The webliography was developed to support librarians and other community members in growing understanding, strategies, and initiatives to serve diverse populations confronting onerous systemic challenges.

Background

As noted by the Prison Policy Initiative, the American criminal justice system holds almost two million people in numerous facilities, including state and federal prisons, juvenile detention centers (JDCs), local jails, military prisons, immigration detention facilities, and psychiatric hospitals (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). Through personal experience, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection, the project team members, other scholars, and community members have come to recognize that this reality is deeply rooted in historic inequity, poverty, and enduring community disinvestment. It is also systemically embedded in the prison industrial complex, “overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” (Critical Resistance, n.d., para. 1). The impacts of inequity echo across communities. As a report from Maryland describes, communities with the highest incarceration rates often need resources for health care, housing, economic development, and social services (Justice Policy Institute & Prison Policy Initiative, 2022). These complex overlapping issues are explored in detail in the findings of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights’ (2019) report *Collateral Consequences: The Crossroads of Punishment, Redemption, and the Effects on Communities*. This report considers how those with criminal histories face extensive barriers related to securing employment and housing, voting, jury duty, holding public office, qualifying for financial aid, college admission, and military service, etc. and notes that “the reach of each collateral consequence extends past people with criminal records to affect families and communities” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019, p. 3). IJI seeks to understand better how libraries of all types effectively mitigate collateral consequences and inequity and what more can be done.

The IJI project is informed by professional literature. In 2017, the Public Library Association published a short book in its Quick Read for Busy Librarians series to introduce librarians to concepts for serving incarcerated populations. After discussing several topics and sharing a few examples, the author, Nick Higgins (2017), posed two insightful questions that served as a jumping-off point for this project: What power do we have as librarians in dismantling systems of oppression, and more importantly, “how do we use that power once we all realize we possess it?” (p. 58). The Higgins text serves its purpose as a basic introduction, but we contend that there is a great need for libraries of all types to become involved in deepening learning and doing more. These disconnects serve as the starting point for our project.

When the IJI project was conceived, there had not been much recent professional focus on serving incarcerated populations. For example, the American Library Association (ALA) published *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* in 1992—30 years ago (ALA, 1992). That said, in 2021, soon after IJI was launched, the ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services (ODLOS) established “a task force of correctional library workers and other institutional stakeholders” and headed to work on an updated “reimagining” of the Standards from 1992 (ALA, n.d., para. 1). These updated Standards will

heed the current phenomenon of mass incarceration, the inequitable incarceration rates of BIPOC individuals, and the rising rates of incarceration of women (especially women of color) and pay special attention to the incarceration of LGBTQIA+ individuals, undocumented individuals, and youth in jails, prisons, and other detention facilities, as well as to the information needs of returning individuals. (ALA, n.d., para. 2)

The revised Standards are set to be completed in 2023. Dr. Jeanie Austin (2021) recently published a seminal text offering clear information and thoughtfully contextualizing library services related to carceral systems. Austin's Library Services and Incarceration advocates for rethinking intersections and exploring possibilities. It is a must-read for librarians across professional contexts and others involved in education, community engagement, and social research. Additional sources that inform this work that may interest those interested in pursuing professional opportunities, expanding outreach services, and augmenting community-based collaboration are described below and presented in the IJI weblibliography.

In addition to insights gleaned through literature, IJI is informed by the lived experience of team members. The project launch involved two CSU faculty, including the author as principal investigator (PI), and eight graduate students in partnership with leaders and members of A Way In and Ex-Cons for Community and Social Change (ECCSC). CSU is a designated Predominately Black Institution located on the Far Southeast Side of Chicago (Schmoke & Scott, 2022). Residents in the surrounding community of Roseland are 95% Black (compared to 29% across Chicago), and the median household income is ~70% of the mean for the city (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning [CMAP], 2022). Most team members live nearby; several are formerly incarcerated and/or had incarcerated family members. A Way In (2019) is an Illinois-based non-profit organization that assists people with felony convictions in navigating the prison-to-school pipeline and gaining access to higher education. Members believe their lived experiences are vital to meaningful conversations around social reform. ECCSC's motto is, "It's Going to Take Us to Save Us" (Nguyen, 2022). ECCSC (2022) is a dynamic Chicago-based coalition involving hundreds of formerly incarcerated individuals who have taken on civic responsibilities to serve communities and push back against recidivism. Members of ECCSC have experience and deep knowledge of mediation and violence de-escalation.

During our project meetings, IJI team members regularly shared insights based on lived experiences. This included expressions of appreciation for dedicated library staff and the diverse services and collections they had encountered while incarcerated and beyond. That said, challenges were also noted, many related to gaps and inconsistencies. For example, most modern libraries and educational programs rely on Internet and database access for browsing and research, but these services often need to be made available to incarcerated people. In recent years, new efforts to expand access have emerged, such as ITHAKA's efforts to improve higher education in prisons through increased access to high-quality educational content via JSTOR (n.d.). Unfortunately, this is far from universal since it is a resource for facilities that offer higher education opportunities. Even within that subset, only a very limited number of spots are generally available in educational programs.

Facilities with active educational programs, such as the Education Justice Project (EJP) housed at the Danville Correctional Center (DCC), an adult male prison in Illinois, have grown information access via an alternative approach: collections developed through enduring concerted efforts. The EJP Community Library boasts over 4,000 volumes used to support "the academic pursuits and research needs of EJP" participants (EJP, n.d., para. 1). This is an excellent resource for these scholars. However, they only represent a small subset of the total population at DCC. Even for well-regarded and established initiatives such as EJP, significant hurdles and limitations can arise when new policies based on censorship and banning materials emerge (Gaines, 2019; Ginsburg, 2019).

In some cases, libraries in prisons can expand information access based on receiving external funding. For example, in 2022, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) and the national non-profit Freedom Reads announced the opening of five Freedom Libraries, which are curated 500-book collections, at Logan Correctional Center (Logan CC), a women's facility located in central Illinois (IDOC, 2022). Freedom Libraries was co-founded in 2021 by Reginald Dwayne Betts, a poet and scholar with a keen appreciation for literature who has shared important insights about the problematic absence of reading materials for those who are incarcerated/in solitary confinement (Freedom Reads, 2023; Wood, 2020).

While all IDOC "facilities operate law and general libraries" (IDOC, n.d., para. 5), most adult facilities in Illinois do not offer robust library collections like EJP at DCC or Freedom Reads at Logan CC. This is not surprising since, according to Gaines (2018), IDOC has seen a significant decrease in the book budget and recently only spent \$276 across the entire system (28 facilities) over the course of a year. When asked about this extremely low amount, a former librarian indicated that in her facility, there was "no budget for the general library for the Illinois Department of Corrections" (Gaines, 2018, para. 7). How can information needs be met in this strange, stressful confining space with no book budget or Internet access? These dire circumstances represent significant challenges within correctional facilities. As the IJI PI discusses in a previously co-authored article about offering library services at youth detention facilities, lack of funding, as well as staffing and other essential support, often leads to patchworked models (Montague & Coyle, 2019), including reliance on seeking other sources of reading materials such as those provided by books-to-prisoners programs (Prison Book Program, n.d.).

To grow our understanding of these critically important and challenging issues, the IJI team sought input from librarians and other library affiliates from across the U.S. This project received generous support for these pursuits through an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Planning Grant.

Methodology

The IJI project was developed as a model of community inquiry. According to Bruce et al. (2014), community inquiry

...emphasizes inquiry conducted of, for, and by communities as living social organisms. It implies support for collaborative activity and for creating knowledge connected to people's values, history, and lived experiences. The inquiry entails open-ended, democratic, participatory engagement. Community inquiry is thus a learning process that brings theory and action together in an experimental and critical manner. (p. 1)

IJI drew on this approach to plan and develop our project activities with a focus on a growing understanding of social justice initiatives, as well as community-centered and outreach services provided by academic, public, and other types of libraries.

Given the timing of the project launch early in the pandemic, some of our initial plans needed to be adapted, and the timeline was extended from one year to two. The project team met monthly to exchange insights, consider issues, and plan methods to carry out our work. Most team meetings needed to be conducted online due to health concerns and gathering limitations. While we originally planned to convene an in-person gathering to consider local issues, we shifted

and expanded our focus. We developed and launched a survey aimed at gaining a greater understanding of current library activities related to serving communities impacted by incarceration, as well as identifying pending gaps/needs. The survey was sent to librarians and other library affiliates. As this inquiry was developed to be conducted online, we were not limited to reaching out to only local librarians; however, we were able to share the results and gain additional local insights through a hybrid symposium in December 2021 and an in-person conference presentation in May 2022. Given our interest in expanding understanding and action, and also in light of pandemic constraints, another area we decided to focus on was the development of a webliography containing resources of interest to librarians and other library affiliates seeking to deepen understanding and engagement related to IJI goals. These key project activities, conducting the survey and building the webliography, are discussed in the following sections.

Library Programs and Services Survey

In early 2021, an online survey was developed by the IJI team. After being reviewed and receiving research approval, it was launched in May 2021. A link to the online survey was shared via ALA Connect (n.d.), a digital portal available to ALA members with limited access for others interested in library-related topics/groups. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix A. An overview of the responses is presented below.

A total of 72 responses were received from a diverse group of librarians and other library affiliates across 24 U.S. states as follows: 55 librarians, ten library staff, 11 library directors, five family members of someone who is/was incarcerated, three Library and Information Science (LIS) students, two library board members, one LIS educator, one volunteer, one retired, and one unemployed. Affiliation categories are not mutually inclusive. Involvement stemmed from 51 participants at a public library, ten at an academic library, six at a special library, and four at a school library. In terms of community size, there were 20 large urban, 20 suburban, 17 rural, and 14 small urban. We were very pleased to have interest and representation from this diverse group of individuals involved in providing library services.

The first survey question was included to gain a general understanding of the range of programs offered at the libraries of the survey participants: “Does your library offer programs and/or services that are grounded in social justice?” Responses were 36 yes, 23 no, and 13 not sure. Only half of the participants said it did. Considering the ALA’s Code of Ethics’s recent adoption of a racial and social justice principle, this proportion was surprisingly low (Zalusky, 2021) and may indicate a deficit in alignment.

Subsequently, questions were focused more on involvement in serving those who are incarcerated and those who had been recently released. Responses to the two questions “How familiar are you with providing library programs and services to individuals who are incarcerated?” and “How familiar are you with providing library programs and services to individuals who have recently been incarcerated?” show similar levels of (lack of) familiarity in serving both of these groups.

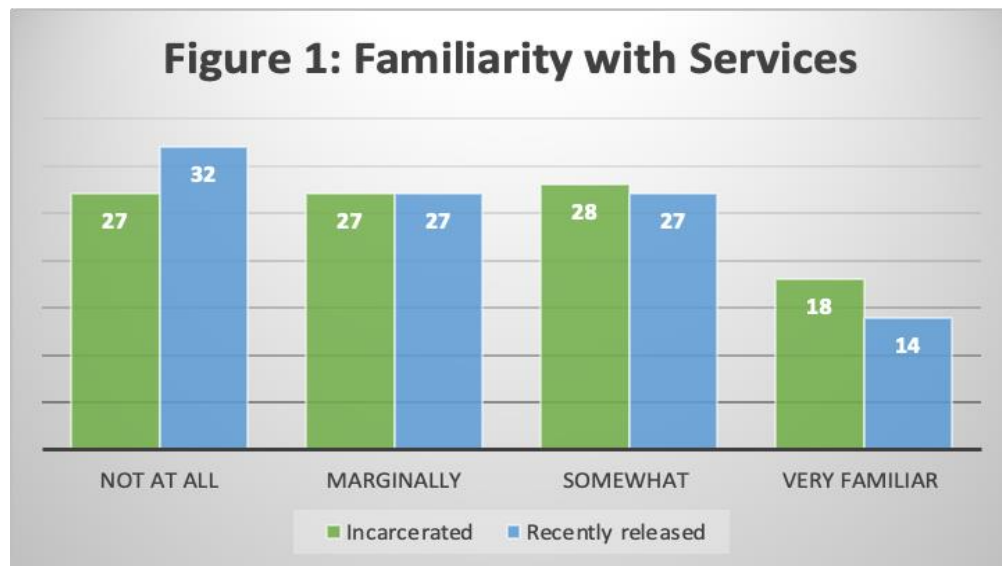


Figure 1. Respondent Familiarity with Services for People Who Are Incarcerated or Those Who Were Recently Released

When specifically questioned if their library offered services to incarcerated people, 48 indicated no, 17 said yes, and six were unsure.

Respondents had space to provide written comments and a wide range of library service examples were mentioned in them, including libraries in jails, prisons, and JDCs; reference and research by mail services; book delivery; basic reading programs; outreach; support for prison education programs; library accounts/lending services; facilitating book donations; providing recreational reading; legal reading; educational reading; workshops; family literacy activities; and book discussion groups. Respondents also indicated that some services had been suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those who said their library did not offer services to people who were incarcerated indicated that this was based on a range of issues, including a lack of awareness, not being a priority, not being relevant to the mission/focus of the particular library, not having local jails/prisons nearby, staffing issues/no outreach, time limitations, being spread too thin, not having anyone wanting to take it on, and challenges with prison regulations/bureaucracy. Participants also said they did not know why these services were not offered.

Regarding offering library programs and services to support recently incarcerated individuals, 44 indicated no, 17 said yes, and ten were unsure. Again, a wide range of library services were mentioned, including library card sign-up service upon release; outreach to parole and other reentry events; specific job support (e.g., providing a list of employers); tech literacy; resumé building; help to find family/friends; producing and distributing reentry guides; providing information on free community services; poetry programs; designated web pages; help with expungement; collaborative services with local writers groups, social workers, and lawyers; and programs to access essential services like ID, food, clothing, shelter, education, jobs, mental health services, and legal aid.

Those who said their library did not offer services to people who were recently released indicated that this was based on a range of issues, including a lack of awareness of the population/needs, being spread too thin, not sure, being beyond the library mission/outside the scope of services, not being on an administration's radar, never considering it, being a very small community, and not having incarceration facilities close by. Of course, folks might still be released from far away and come to the community. Some responses indicated that individuals likely participated in relevant services despite not being offered explicitly. For example, they were not offered in an organized manner (based on the likely needs of members of this group), or walk-in services were available to everyone, which may include people from this population.

In addition to providing a window into current library services offered to incarcerated individuals and those recently released, the survey participants also offered their insights regarding a range of services and programs needed in their community.

For serving people who are incarcerated, these include:

- Creating/linking to a publishing platform for writers and artists
- Collaborating with local groups to facilitate book donations

To support reentry, ideas were to:

- Offer reentry-focused resources and classes (computer/tech, job training, financial advice, social work topics, legal clinics)
- Connect/establish new partnerships with incarceration facilities, parole services, and potential community organization partners
- Sponsor a citizen circle
- Extend bookmobile service
- Expand community-building through meals, art, and culture talks
- Outreach with the business community

For either/both, developing (more):

- Trauma-informed programs
- Arts programming
- Book clubs
- Parent reading programs
- Early literacy programs
- GED support

- Research support

Survey respondents also indicated not knowing what was needed, the importance of gaining input (e.g., the user needs survey), that more staff training was needed, and that the least the library could do was to have a brochure. Following our discussion of the results during a conference presentation, we learned that one of the attendees decided to address a service gap at her library by creating an information table with relevant resources. Additional opportunities to expand understanding and services may also emerge through increased communication and collaboration between librarians (or other educators/advocates) who work in carceral facilities and those working in other nearby libraries.

In reviewing the survey responses and discussing them as part of project-related activities, the IJI project team also worked in tandem to develop a webliography to further extend understanding and support librarians and library affiliates in grappling with possibilities in providing services grounded in social justice, particularly for individuals who are incarcerated and those who were recently released.

Webliography

Throughout the project, the IJI team met to consider activities and review resources to inform our understanding. Based on these discussions, we selected resources of possible interest to librarians, students, educators, community leaders, and others working for justice and developed an annotated webliography to share them openly. The resources are grouped into seven areas, presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. IJI Webliography Section Titles and Descriptions

IJI Section Title	Description
IJI 101	With themes linked to libraries, incarceration, and justice, introductory documents may be of particular interest to those new to exploring these issues. Through the inclusion of relevant data, policies, and first-person accounts, these materials highlight the importance of critical analysis.
LIS Initiative	Projects, tools, and guides that may serve as examples for those aiming to launch and grow their involvement.
Research/Professional Reading	Online and print-based resources of possible interest to librarians, educators, community leaders, and others. Contemporary and critically important topics such as censorship, health, and poverty are included.
Some Organizations of Interest	These include examples of local, regional, and national groups working to provide and support direct services. They also offer focused approaches based on particular needs (e.g., expression, employment, housing, LGBTQIA+, literacy, women, youth, etc.).

Prison Education	An incomplete/growing list of prison education initiatives based in the U.S.
Reentry Challenges	A few resources highlighting diverse voices, lived experiences, policies, and strategy ideas for growing better approaches. This section was added recently based on team discussions about the need to bring more focused attention to these complex challenges.
Local Resources	These are allied agencies and community service providers located in/around Chicago of particular interest to those involved locally and those planning to begin offering new/expanded services.

The full IJI webliography and other project resources are available at: <https://infojusticeinstitute.wordpress.com/project-resources-and-research/>

By early 2023, the webliography had grown to encompass 120 annotated resources, including links to academic articles and other professional resources. Most materials are print-based and focus on the U.S. context. A few resources from international perspectives and examples from other national contexts, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Germany, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, and Sri Lanka, are also included. We expect to update materials periodically. As noted on the site, suggestions and comments are welcome.

Next Steps

The IJI project was based on a planning grant to bring librarians and community members together to consider issues and questions to build understanding around critical community needs. In addition to developing our collaboration, our initial exploration and experience will offer valuable insights and resources for others. Our project was informed by professional literature, dialogue, and the consideration of the results of a survey of librarians and other library affiliates. These data sources focused on growing understanding to inform evolving services based on the needs of incarcerated/recently released people and their support networks. In tandem, we developed and launched an annotated webliography to reflect and amplify this work centered on serving diverse populations confronting onerous systemic challenges. As more focus and energy around critical awareness and social justice issues emerge from individuals with lived experience in tandem with professional sources, librarians and other community leaders may move closer to developing policies and practices to address root issues of economic, social, and political problems.

Those familiar with this sort of work recognize many dynamic challenges and complex obstacles to confront. Moving forward requires more and better resources along with critical analysis, thoughtful and creative engagement, diverse perspectives (including centering lived experience), and persistence. As evident in this project and the many others featured in the webliography, awareness and collective momentum are growing. In considering how to use your power, we encourage you to draw on these examples and to continue acting, reflecting, and engaging in community inquiry.

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Appendix A

Library Programs and Services Survey Questions

1. a. Does your library offer programs and/or services that are grounded in social justice?
 Yes No Not sure
b. If so, please elaborate and provide an example. If not, please explain why not.
c. If your library offers programs and/or services that are grounded in social justice, are you aware of any challenges in offering them? If so, please list them.
2. How familiar are you with providing library programs and services to individuals who are incarcerated?
 Very Somewhat Marginally Not at all
3. How familiar are you with providing library programs and services to individuals who have recently been incarcerated?
 Very Somewhat Marginally Not at all
4. How familiar are you with providing library programs and services to family members of individuals who are incarcerated?
5. Very Somewhat Marginally Not at all
6. Does your library offer programs and/or services to support individuals who are currently incarcerated?
 Yes No Not sure
If so, please describe them. If not, please explain why not.
7. Does your library offer programs and/or services to support individuals who have recently been incarcerated?
 Yes No Not sure
If so, please describe them. If not, please explain why not.
8. Does your library offer programs and/or services to support family members of individuals who are incarcerated?
 Yes No Not sure
If so, please describe them. If not, please explain why not.

9. What additional types of library programs and/or services to support individuals who are incarcerated and/or recently incarcerated and/or their families would you like to see offered by your library?

10. Did you learn about providing library programs and/or services to support individuals who are incarcerated and/or recently incarcerated and/or their families through studies?

If yes, please describe the type(s) of educational program, coursework, assignments, readings of note, etc.

11. Additional comments. Please share any information you believe would inform this investigation.

Demographics

1. Check all that apply. I am a:

Librarian Library staff person Library volunteer Library director/executive
 Library board member LIS student LIS educator

Retired librarian/library staff member Former librarian/library staff member

Person who was formerly incarcerated Family member of someone is/was incarcerated

2. Type of library. Which type of library are you primarily affiliated with?

Academic library Public library School library Special library

Archive Other

3. Which kind of community does your library serve?

Large urban Small urban Suburban Rural

4. In which U.S. state is your library located? If non-U.S., please indicate the country.