LIBRARY RESEARCH SERVICE

COLORADO State Library

PRISM

The PRISM Project:

Are PRISon Libraries Motivators of Prosocial Behavior and Successful Re-entry?

A Collaboration Between

Library Research Service, Colorado State Library (Colorado Department of Education)
Institutional Library Development, Colorado State Library (Colorado Department of Education)
Colorado Department of Corrections
Remerg
Renewed Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Do prison libraries help people? If so, then how? A team of researchers from the Colorado State Library's Library Research Service (LRS), Colorado Department of Corrections, Remerg, a Denver-area re-entry nonprofit and an independent library consultant, Renewed Libraries, led the PRISM Project which aimed to discover, "Are PRISon Libraries Motivators of Prosocial Behavior and Successful Re-entry?" The PRISM Project used mixed methods–focus groups inside prisons in Colorado, as well as with previously incarcerated people, and surveys, also with both populations. The study focused on the outcomes of prison library services, centering the experiences of people who have been or are currently incarcerated to determine the significance of the prison library to them, both inside and outside of prison. This research will help move the discussion of prison library impacts from anecdote to data and fill a gap in research on the subject.

This project was funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and spanned the years 2022-2025. This dataset helps to build a long-overlooked outcomes-based understanding of prison libraries in the same vein as impact studies that are increasingly common in academic, public, and school libraries to show how libraries help or change people or communities. We hope that this research will help to build a foundation for outcomes-based research in prison libraries that will help prison library staff, departments of corrections, and librarians to better understand prison libraries, patron needs, and how to improve services.

This study focuses on prosocial behaviors, defined by CDOC as "positive social interaction with employees and contract workers, family members, and other offenders that respects the rights and boundaries of other individuals" (2025, AR 0650-04), and how those behaviors might impact the lives of people in prison and their ability to successfully re-enter society. Research shows that the vast majority of people who are incarcerated will be released from prison (Ositelu, 2025, p. 1), thus understanding how the library might help them prepare to successfully return to their families and communities is crucial to the work of prison libraries.

Focus groups took place in 2023, as facilities were beginning to reopen and library services were resuming after being on lockdown for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys were subsequently administered from 2023-2025. Surveys are still being analyzed and will not be covered in this paper. The focus groups with people who are currently incarcerated were led by researchers from the Library Research Service (LRS, an office of CSL), while Remerg facilitated groups with those who were recently incarcerated.

A team of LRS staff and an outside library consultant from Renewed Libraries analyzed data from focus groups and surveys as these data became available. This grounded-theory approach enabled the team to adjust the survey instruments and to develop a codebook grounded in the empirical insights gained over a three-year period. The codebook was initially established using the guiding research questions from the IMLS proposal:

1. What are the outcomes of prison library use, and in particular, those related to prosocial behaviors, information literacy and learning skills, and preparing for successful re-entry to the community?

2. What types of collections, programs, and services are associated with positive outcomes of prison library use in the view of the service users?

3. In what ways can prison libraries be improved, either by increasing the variety of positive outcomes to which they contribute or by improving their effectiveness in contributing to current, known outcomes?

This research is designed to be replicable in different prison contexts in the United States, which vary widely from state to state and system to system. To facilitate this, the research team created a toolkit that includes

the survey instruments, a sample codebook, and tips to help other researchers succeed in replicating the PRISM Project in other settings. As stated, this project was highly collaborative and demonstrates that librarian-researchers can enter different prisons to conduct focus groups, provide access to online and paper surveys in the appropriate language to people who are currently incarcerated, conduct focus groups, and deliver surveys to people who were formerly incarcerated by leveraging the connections and knowledge of people currently working in the re-entry services community. This can all take place without creating security issues or unreasonable disruptions to library services , and it can yield results that build understanding of how libraries in prisons work, how they can be improved, and what they mean to people who are living in prisons and those who have returned to society.

Once all data collection was complete, the PRISM study included 62 focus groups — 54 from inside Colorado facilities and eight conducted with people who were previously incarcerated. We also received 271 surveys from formerly incarcerated people, plus 456 from currently incarcerated individuals. This report focuses on the data gained from the focus group interviews, with the analysis of the surveys to be concluded in 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The PRISM study succeeded in identifying outcomes of prison library use, the services that led to those outcomes, and ways for prison libraries to improve. Above all, the sentiments regarding prison libraries from both currently and formerly incarcerated people were overwhelmingly positive. Even while identifying barriers to use and thoughts for improvement, focus group participants were resoundingly thankful and positive when describing their experiences.

This project also aimed to identify prosocial behaviors associated with prison library use. Thirteen prosocial behaviors were identified in focus group transcripts in total. This analysis focuses on four of these:

- Connection with others
- Respect for others/property
- Expressing appreciation
- Helping others

Instances of connecting with others were frequently identified in 85% of transcripts and were a direct result of time spent in the library with other residents, staff, and loved ones outside of prison, or engaging with materials checked out from the library. Many participants expressed appreciation and gratitude for their experiences with the library, and for their interactions with library staff. Respect for others/property was shown in regards to the library space, materials and people inside the library. Participants described behaving differently in the library because they respected the library space and staff.

Self-regulation was a prosocial behavior that occurred when people opted to remove themselves from negative situations and instead engaged with the library or library materials. Self-regulation was used as a coping mechanism and was therefore closely related to the code “mental health.” Statements coded with “mental health” included instances of people using the library to stay sane, sharp, and optimistic. “Behavior modification” was often coded alongside “mental health.”

Behavior modification due to opportunities to visit the library was identified in roughly 75% of transcripts. Some people modified their behavior in order to stay out of trouble and maintain library privileges, whereas others found that library use changed their perspectives, moods or thoughts, which in turn influenced their behaviors, too. Behavior modification was regularly identified alongside the code “library as a place of peace.” This was often in cases where people had changed their behaviors inside the library in order to maintain an environment of peacefulness, which was unlike the rest of prison. This escape from the normal, loud prison environment was an extremely common theme throughout the research. “Escapism” was the second most common reason that people inside used their prison library and allowed people to dissociate

from their current situation. “Passing time” was another common reason for library use, but the most common reason was for information access. “Information access” was the most frequently applied code in all of the transcripts.

Closely related to information access were the codes “self-led learning” and “literacy.” People engaged in self-led learning in order to broaden their horizons, find self-help, and build skills for use in prison and upon re-entry into society outside of prison. Improving literacy was another type of self-led learning and outcome of prison library use.

The above outcomes were made possible thanks to a variety of collections, services, and programs. Focus group participants mentioned a wide variety of these, but a few stood out among the rest. “Collection” was the second most frequently coded library service and referred to any cohesive group of materials within the library. The library collection helped people learn as well as access information. As mentioned above, “information access” was very prevalent in discussions of reasons for prison library use. A subset of this, “re-entry information,” was far less prevalent, but still extremely important when available.

“Music” (a type of collection) was an unexpectedly common code. Listening to music in the library gave people a rare sense of autonomy and was commonly coded alongside “mental health” suggesting a relationship between the two concepts. Reading materials were a more obvious collection mentioned by participants and a wide variety of titles and topics were shared. These materials accessed in the library helped people develop empathy, which was one of the prosocial behaviors identified.

Library programs were undergoing a shift during the focus groups; the loosening of restrictions in a post-COVID world had just recently allowed for the return of some prison library programming which had been sorely missed. Read to the Children stood out as a highly valued program that allowed people to engage in many prosocial behaviors including connecting with others, role modeling, expressing appreciation, social norms/normalization, and agreement. The importance of this program in peoples’ lives really cannot be understated.

Though many library services were identified, three were most closely related to the outcomes of library use outlined above. Staff were of utmost importance to focus group participants. The way that library staff treated patrons was often identified as uniquely positive compared to other staff and resident interactions that emphasize the power dynamics within the prison atmosphere. Library staff were regularly found to be helpful, kind, and vital to the overall success of a prison library.

A surprising finding in the research was the importance of “soft seats” as a library service. Soft seats were often mentioned when describing the “library as a place of peace” and were found to provoke positive mental shifts for people. Interlibrary loan as a library service also cannot go without mentioning. In libraries with limited collections, access to this service was vital in order to fulfill patron’s information and recreation needs.

Despite the many positive experiences with prison libraries, there remain many barriers to use and avenues for continued improvement. “Barriers to use” was the third-most common code used for the inside focus group transcripts, and the second for outside transcripts. Barriers included policies, security restrictions, poor collections, lack of information about the library, staffing shortages, and discouragement from staff. With these barriers come ideas for improvement.

Collection quality and quantity were two areas identified for improvement. The importance of a high quality collection is underscored by the ties between collection and social connection, as shown by the outcomes of prison library use. Related to this, censorship was mentioned as a policy that created a barrier. The lack of access to newspapers and periodicals created an information gap and widened the divide of connecting with others on the outside. Similarly, the lack of re-entry information from the library was regularly mentioned, as was access to modern information in general. The library catalog was identified as a barrier because it was cumbersome to use, and unhelpful for discovering new resources. Some

prison libraries do not have any catalog access at all, or people are unaware that it exists. Requests had to be passed through library staff.

Library staff are immensely important to the success of a prison library, and the irregularity and inability to meet staffing standards was identified as a barrier. Library staff both literally and metaphorically hold the key to the library, and therefore the information and enjoyment within. Beyond this, additional training for current staff could also help improve customer service, reach more people and increase the library's potential reach. Though not frequent, a few people did mention instances of negative interactions or relationships with library staff as well as experiences of discomfort or violence between patrons that prevented them from using the library. Unmet staffing needs as well as policy restrictions due to COVID and other factors also meant that library programs were insufficient in the eyes of many. The power of library programs to foster prosocial behaviors is important, and more programming was requested regularly.

Though this study cannot draw causational conclusions, our findings indicate that prison libraries are in fact motivators of prosocial behavior and in turn, assist people in successful re-entry. The collections, services, and programs that the library provides are invaluable to their patrons, and the effects of these are felt long after re-entry. As with any library, there remains gaps in service, and many opportunities for improvement. The information learned, connections built, and positive mental and behavioral health changes made thanks to prison libraries all contribute to the development of a wide variety of prosocial behaviors and without a doubt assist people in re-entry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of library services for incarcerated people in the United States dates back at least as far as 1870, with shifting aims, ebbs, and flows since that time (Austin, 2022). The first nationwide standards for library services for incarcerated people were established by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1944, and have been periodically revised and updated since, most recently in 2024. Further to these *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained*, the ALA's *Prisoner's Right to Read*, which was first adopted in 2010, then updated in 2014 and 2019, positions the "preservation of intellectual freedom for individuals of any age held in jails, prisons, detention facilities, juvenile facilities, immigration facilities, prison work camps, and segregated units within any facility, whether public or private" within the purview of librarians and the public.

Guidelines for services in prisons and jails also exist at the international level. These include the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*, now in its 4th edition, and the United Nations (UN) S*tandard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*. Rule 64 of the UN's standards states that "Every prison shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it."

Regardless of these professional expectations, standards, and human rights laws, library service levels, expectations, and practices vary from one facility and state to the next, as well as between individuals and departments. This extends to the ways that library services are evaluated in each organization and the fact that the methods by which libraries evaluate their services have shifted over time. Outcomes and impact-based evaluation prioritizes the experiences of library users over input, output, and usage statistics. *Project Outcome* by the Public Library Association (2016) defines an outcome as "a specific benefit that results from a library program or service." Impact measurements look specifically at "how people have changed over time and what the significant factors have been in bringing about this change" (Brophy, 2006, p. 58). Impact data is regarded as the "most important indicator of a library's effectiveness and represents its most meaningful approach to accountability," yet it is notoriously difficult to capture because it is longitudinal

(Connaway, Silipigni and Powell, 2010, pp. 75-76). Until recently, there was a "near-total lack of data" in regards to the impact of prison library services to people who are incarcerated (Rosen, 2020, p. 38).

While some aspects of library services to users for incarcerated people have changed over time, one constant is that there is never enough–resources, as in staff time and budgets, or information about library services to incarcerated people. A review of scholarly literature relating to the subject, conducted by Jane Garner in 2020, showed that most researchers published "only once on the topic rather than building a thematic program of research in the area" over 30 years (p. 241). These shortcomings in research at the intersections of library services and incarceration relate to the need for the PRISM Project, not only in sharing research findings, but also to produce a toolkit to aid other library workers in conducting research in these environments.

Insofar as impact research has been applied at all in the context of library services and incarceration, "critical reasoning skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, empowerment, and changed perspectives," have been identified as possible impacts, as well as "hope, motivation, social bonds, and mental health" (Warr, 2016, p. 18; Finlay and Bates, 2018; Rosen, 2020). Rosen noted, in 2020, that "the majority of prison library literature remains descriptive in nature and relies more on speculation than empirical claims when describing impact" (p. 38). A 2020 study of library workers who provide services to incarcerated people found that most were not undertaking any formal evaluations and therefore used surrogate measures, such as expressions of gratitude, as substitutes for impact measurement (Jordan-Makely, et al., 2024).

Some researchers have called attention to the emphasis that outcomes and impact research places on rehabilitation and re-entry, a focus which obscures the right to read and positions library services as a privilege, contingent on patrons' behavior. Escapism, however, centers the patron's experience and well-being. As identified by Garner (2020), escapism is a feeling known to most readers, but especially important for incarcerated people. Participants in that study said they were "able to experience a form of escape by using their libraries and through reading books supplied by these libraries" (Garner, 2020, p. 5). Garner also conducted a phenomenological study in prison libraries in Australia that grouped the described experiences of library users according to three themes: "library as opportunity for autonomy," "library as therapy," and "library role in behaviour management" (2019, p. 346). This research supports the claim that library use in jails and prisons benefits patrons' well-being and "the whole person." Participants "attributed the relief of boredom enabled by visiting the library and reading library books to keeping them out of trouble and from committing further crimes, particularly drug use, while in prison" (Garner, 2019, p. 353).

In 2019, a study was conducted in two prisons in Nigeria that aimed at assessing library users' attitudes towards library services and the effect of the library on their psychological wellbeing. The researchers concluded in the affirmative that "bibliotherapy" was conducive to their research participants' rehabilitation and showed through survey results that they thought positively about the library. Statistical analysis showed that "self-acceptance, personal growth, and environmental mastery of the construct of psychological wellbeing are indeed related to inmates' library attitude" (Emasealu, 2019, pp. 85-86).

Escapism, the feeling of disappearing into a riveting story, "being exposed to the knowledge we find in books, and being in the libraries that provide us access to these books," can help people to step outside of a difficult situation, such as literally being incarcerated, as identified by Garner (2020, p. 5). While this notion of escapism may on the face of it seem at odds with "prosocial behaviors," disconnecting from unhealthy environments can be a positive choice. Prosocial behaviors have been linked with positive outcomes in social relationships, and psychological health and well-being. The term "prosocial behavior" has been used since at least 1972, when it was used in reference to behaviors that were not antisocial. Prosocial behaviors have been studied in child psychology since 1985 to identify actions intended to help others or create harmony in a group. In these contexts, prosocial

behavior has been linked with helping others, altruism, and empathy.

Over time, jails and prisons have altered their orientation towards either punishment or rehabilitation. The move to position libraries as an aid in "reform" dates back to the 1950s (Austin, 2022). Coyle, in 1987, introduced the "public library model," orienting libraries in jails and prisons towards the ALA *Library Bill of Rights*. A more recent trend to "normalize" prison settings means creating "opportunities for prison life to mirror normal life as far as possible," and has been shown to have "genuinely positive impacts on offenders' behaviour" (Steer, Jewkes, Humphreys, et al. 2016). Thus, present-day prisons are often designed with the intent of creating conditions to engender prosocial behaviors, a term used increasingly in the lexicon of corrections administrators and even in regards to jail and prison staff themselves. "Commitment to the organization apparently is one explanation for why correctional officers perform prosocial acts on the job," a study concluded, though "no significant correlations were found for achievement, empathy, and concern for others" (Culliver, Sigley, Macneley, 1991, p. 277).

Reading fiction has been linked with empathy, insofar as the reader puts themselves in someone else's shoes and imagines what they may be feeling (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013). Other studies have connected library use with prosocial outcomes such as feeling connected to one's community, and well-being (Zickuhr and Purcell, 2014; Blatt, Paloney, Pawelski, et al., 2024). However, low literacy has long been associated with social problems, with some reports citing that up to 75% of people who are incarcerated cannot read (Herrick, 1991; NCES, 1994). It is noted that while "learning to read by itself will not prevent participation in crime, illiteracy may preclude knowledge of the legal system, participation in treatment programs, finishing education, finding employment, and may interfere with establishing good social relationships" (Herrick, 1991).

Further to understanding how libraries engender prosocial behaviors, the PRISM study also set out to learn how libraries in carceral settings could be improved. Staff from CSL were, after all, integral to developing the new *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained*, guidelines that are designed to be "comprehensive without becoming prescriptive" (Boyington, et al., 2024). Library services in carceral facilities are notorious for varying from one to the next, as noted by Lehmann in 2003, "from fledgling attempts by a few pioneering individuals or spearheading organizations to establish a few basic services as part of a comprehensive prison education, rehabilitation, and recreation program" (p. 301).

There are many barriers that are known to limit access to information in jails and prisons (Arford, 2013; Austin, 2019, 2022; Day, Leblanc, and Nwokoloh, 2024; Jordan-Makely et al., 2024). A report to the United Nations General Assembly, in 2009, took note of "inadequate prison libraries, or the absence of prison libraries and the absence and confiscation of written and educational material in general," reported by library users themselves, who mentioned also restrictions and "often a complete absence of, access to and training in information and communication technology and related skills necessary in everyday life" (Munoz, 2009). The many obstacles that impede information access can be taken as opportunities for improvement. Correcting these issues continues the trend to normalize carceral settings. This approach to library services in carceral settings means "providing free access to information and offering the same variety of material as the outside community" and upholding the "values at the heart of librarianship, and [Library and Information Science]: access, democracy, diversity and intellectual freedom" (Austin, et al. 2020, p. 169).

Library workers in carceral settings must follow administrative rules and work around other impediments like their patrons' strict schedules (Vogel, 2009, Jordan-Makely et al., 2024). As recognized by Finlay, Hanlon, and Bates, a research team who conducted interviews with "global prison library experts," in 2021, "the quality and extent of library provision is also dependent on prison policy or rules in particular contexts" (2024, p. 3). This team likewise noted the connection between inconsistent library services across prisons and support–or lack thereof–from prison administrators. As described by others who

have researched library services in prisons, "This is because the facility's main priorities are concerned with security and potential security risks, not with the access to information that inmates have" (Day, Leblanc, and Nwokoloh, 2024, para. 13).

Other researchers have also written extensively about censorship as an impediment to library use (Austin, 2023; Day, Leblanc, Nokwoloh, 2024; Eads, 2023; Marquis and Luna, 2023). This includes library workers practicing self-censorship in an attempt to adhere to guidelines in the facilities where they work, or due to their own biases (Arford, 2016; Jordan-Makely, et. al, 2024). As described by Austin, 2023, "passive censorship" is enacted "through limited attention to library services for people who are incarcerated. Lack of staff, books, access to library spaces, or even a physical space for books and information inside facilities is a passive and pervasive form of censorship" (p. 2).

As described in the *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained*, jail and prison library collections "should be sufficient to meet the specific information needs of the population but also be broad and responsive enough, through purchases and/or interlibrary loan, to provide a depth of interest and allow for personally directed growth." On censorship, they offer detailed guidance on navigating this "reality," but also state clearly:

> Censorship should be no greater than necessary to maintain the safety and security of the institution. Carceral facilities must strive to create and execute nonarbitrary, consistent, and clear rules. Decisions should be documented and promptly and transparently communicated to users, publishers, and libraries providing support services. Restriction must be the exception, not the default. (Boyington, et al., 2024, p. vii)

Further to guidance regarding censorship and collections, jail and prison administrators and library staff can look to the ALA standards for guidance on creating safe and welcoming spaces for library users. Library staff should be recognized as integral to the library experience, such that they "ensure that collections, programs, and services uphold, and adhere to, ALA standards" (Boyington, et al., 2024, p. xx). Maintaining these professional ideals positions library workers also as "advocates for people in the process of re-entry" (Austin, 2022, p. 143; Ringrose, 2020). Thus, relationships with library staff inside of jails and prisons may build a bridge to library use later on, and help prepare people for re-entry. The *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained* state:

> Incarcerated or detained users should leave their facility with a connection to a public library in their community or their local school district library, as appropriate. Carceral library staff should encourage people exiting the carceral environment to begin or continue a relationship with public libraries and should provide information to individuals about how to access library services once released, including enabling those leaving prison to do so with a library card in hand. Public libraries should coordinate with carceral library staff to provide outreach to recently released people. (Boyington, et al., 2024, p. 5)

This underscores the role library staff may play in regards to library services for incarcerated patrons and prosocial behaviors, and the need for research that documents these connections from the viewpoints of library users who are or were previously incarcerated.

METHODS

The scaffolding for the PRISM study was designed through an IMLS-funded planning project that set out to determine the best ways to assess how Colorado prison libraries may help people who are incarcerated to "stay occupied productively and out of trouble while incarcerated and maximize their

chances of successful re-entry into the community" (CLiC, 2018).

As is often the case, the PRISM study methods did alter some from the original research proposal, due to changes in administrative staff, partner organizations, and the level of institutional access granted to the research team. Our approach was also informed by our evolving understanding of "prosocial behaviors" and as new research was conducted and published in regards to library services and incarceration. The PRISM Project used grounded theory, which "values the process of continuously developing, refining, and enhancing theory in recognitions that other studies, perspectives, and minds can make to the original effort" (Connaway and Powell, 2010, p. 230). Remerg, a nonprofit that addresses the needs of formerly incarcerated people re-entering the community, was a key player in helping to renegotiate the project and developing the survey instruments and research design.

As people who are incarcerated or were previously incarcerated represent a particularly vulnerable group of research subjects, an independent review board, Heartland IRB, was contracted to help ensure compliance with 45 CFR 46. The survey instrument and research design were approved by Heartland IRB and approved by the Colorado Department of Corrections through their internal processes.

The PRISM study used survey instruments and focus groups to connect with people who are currently incarcerated, and those who were previously incarcerated and have since returned to their homes and communities, to assess what outcomes, if any, could be ascribed to participants' use of libraries in the Colorado facilities where they are or were incarcerated.

Surveys were distributed inside and outside facilities both on paper and online, with a target sample size of 267 responses from outside and 324 from inside. Our team worked closely with Remerg to revise a survey instrument that was originally created during the grant proposal process. It was intended to be as succinct as possible, and sensitivity readers helped to develop questions that were appropriate for the intended participants. The language that was used in both the focus group questions and surveys was intentionally straightforward, written at a fifth-grade level, and as inviting as possible. Paper surveys were sent to a random selection of currently incarcerated individuals, and the survey was also available online in the prison libraries for anyone interested in taking it. Surveys to people who were formerly incarcerated were made available at parole offices and transitional housing facilities to anyone interested in taking the survey. Findings from these surveys will not be discussed in this white paper. Instead, a secondary paper will be published at a later date to include those findings.

With focus groups, our goal was to reach participants in all Colorado state funded prisons at all custody levels. Inside focus groups participants were randomly selected, then sent invitations to participate. Participation in the outside focus groups was solicited through flyers and word of mouth at parole offices and transitional housing facilities. Each focus group, both inside and outside, had at least two interviewers present: one to take notes and handle the recording, and one to ask questions. The question schedule was created by the original project team, then amended by members of Library Research Service and Remerg.

Focus groups were semi-structured, with a main body of questions and optional, follow-up questions that interviewers asked according to their own discretion, and the flow and content of the group discussion. Interviewers also asked clarifying questions when they deemed it necessary. For the inside groups, snacks were offered as a thank you for participation. While designing our protocol, a formerly incarcerated individual gave us advice to bring fresh fruit and vegetables to the groups, which ended up being incredibly popular. Interviewers from Remerg, our partner organization, traveled to eight locations throughout Colorado to host eight focus groups with formerly incarcerated people,

one of which was virtual. Participants were compensated for their time with incentives worth about $20 each.

As soon as interviews were complete, the recordings were sent to Rev for transcription. We then uploaded the data to a recognized qualitative research tool, Dedoose, and began applying codes to transcripts, starting with a list of terms that we expected we may see, which grew and became more defined as our research progressed. Our team kept a codebook which included definitions and notes as to how the terms related to one another. We used a catch-all code, "other," for noteworthy excerpts that defied our preconceived list. The research team all took part in coding, and met bi-weekly to discuss their experiences and questions. The codebook came to include 23 "parent codes," some with subheadings (or "child codes"); for example, "Barriers to use," was a parent code with 15 possible child codes, such as "borrowing time limit," and "time allowance." Besides agreeing on definitions, the team also determined parameters for the length of each excerpt. Rather than coding every remark independently, we found that it was more useful to take one "chunk" of conversation at a time, since some participants would riff for a while on a theme or question. Another use of our meeting time was to explore and learn about Dedoose. This was especially true as we were testing for inter-rater reliability, to ensure our agreement in how the codes were applied across the data, from one researcher to the next.

POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT

The PRISM Project team was composed of researchers in Colorado and a consultant from Massachusetts, with significant input from advisors at Remerg (a Denver-area re-entry non-profit) and Colorado State Library colleagues who work inside of Colorado prisons and prison libraries. Each of our identities, backgrounds, and worldviews informed how we engaged with participants, interpreted data, and shaped the design of this study. We recognize that our experiences of working in libraries and outsider status relative to the incarcerated community positions us with both limitations and responsibilities. We do not claim to speak for those who are system-impacted, but rather to center and amplify their voices, experiences, and expertise within this research.

Our academic and professional training in Library and Information Science and involvement in prison library programs have informed our understanding of the role of literacy, learning, and access to information in carceral settings.

Throughout the research process, our team has engaged in continuous reflexivity through extensive conversations within our group, as well as with subject matter experts and individuals with lived experience of incarceration. These practices have helped us to challenge our assumptions, identify biases, and remain attentive to the power dynamics inherent in research relationships, particularly when working with a historically marginalized and surveilled population.

We also acknowledge the potential for institutional constraints (e.g., prison policies, surveillance, stigmatization of formerly incarcerated individuals) to influence participants' willingness or ability to speak openly. We have taken care to create conditions of trust, confidentiality, and respect, and to honor the autonomy of participants throughout our research.

LIMITATIONS

A variety of limitations arose throughout our research process. One such limitation was the terminology used by administrators in Colorado prisons, and the lack of definitions and clarity relative to this language. Descriptors that we had planned to use, such as custody levels, were ill-defined, in reality. While custody levels do exist, and shape the experiences of people who participated in the PRISM study, there are many shades of grey within these levels. These data therefore defied the model we had expected to use, and we were unable to draw meaningful comparisons between custody levels and other descriptors that we had initially intended to study. We therefore revisited these data

after having analyzed them to the best of our ability to ensure that they matched as closely and realistically as possible. We have included a list of these definitions in the attached Appendix A.

A few limitations arose while conducting focus groups. A few participants of the inside groups told us how the invitation to participate raised suspicion; the wording of the invite, along with official state logos made people wary to participate. The delivery method also caused unease; some invitations were slid under doors during the night, and this made some people uncomfortable. The organizers of the outside focus groups also found it challenging at times to recruit participants.

Another limitation was our inability to include the voice of every person that we heard from in the following report. While we greatly value all of the data and stories that we gathered from our research, and want to center these voices over our own analysis, it is not possible to include every one of the hundreds of excerpts that we collected, or even every one of the quotes that seemed important. While we have placed emphasis throughout this study on genuine representation of people's words, we have edited the quotes in this paper for clarity. Also of note, some focus group participants said they were unable to speak about their experiences with library services because they had been incarcerated during the COVID pandemic, and therefore had not had the opportunity to visit the library, or to use libraries to their fullest extent.

This study also focuses solely on prisons, and not jails or other detention centers, though these data likely shed light on similar experiences of people incarcerated in those types of facilities as well. Nevertheless, it is necessary to clarify that these focus groups and surveys were limited to this specific context of Colorado prisons (not including privately run facilities).

Even as our data analysis was coming to a close, our own understanding of the patterns emerging from these data continued to grow and come into focus. Thus, it is only in hindsight that we realized we should also have been coding for literacy, non-fiction, studying, and self-regulation, as in when someone separated themselves from a scenario that was challenging or toxic through using the library or reading. We nevertheless discuss these themes in the following analysis.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Focus Group Characteristics

This report focuses on qualitative themes that emerged from participants' voices during focus groups conducted in Colorado prisons with respect to library services. However, it also includes some quantitative data to describe the participant population and link certain themes to different focus group characteristics. We tracked five characteristics, also called descriptors, across each of the inside focus groups: custody level, number of participants, gender, the library's collection size, and the number of library staff measured in full-time equivalents (FTEs). For 30 of the 54 focus groups, we also recorded whether participants were in Special Management Groups, such as an Incentive Unit, Management Control, or a Residential Treatment Program. Definitions of these groups can be found in Appendix A.

Custody levels were tracked for all 54 inside focus groups we conducted and categorized into three main groups: Minimum, Medium, and Close. "Minimum" applies to incarcerated individuals with the lowest security restrictions. "Close" refers to those with the highest security restrictions. Out of the 54 focus groups, 24 were designated as Close or Close & Below, 19 as Medium or Medium & Below, and 11 as Minimum or Minimum Restrictive & Below. The term "& Below" indicates that a focus group also included people from less restrictive custody levels.

The number of participants was tracked in 51 focus groups. Whether due to security restrictions, conflicting schedules, or lack of participation, 15 focus groups had only one participant; thus, these were interviews that followed the same question schedule. Most focus groups (16) included two or three participants, while 14 focus groups had four or five participants. Six focus groups consisted of six or seven participants. Seven focus groups were conducted with women's groups, and 46 were conducted with men. This difference reflects the demographics of the larger prison population, where two facilities are for women, who make up less than ten percent of all incarcerated people in Colorado.

The library spaces and services offered therein varied significantly between facilities. The size of the libraries' collections ranged from 3,431 to 14,493 items. Each library employs between .2 and four full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. Only one facility has fewer than 1 FTE staff. Nine facilities have one staff FTE, and six facilities have two or close to two staff FTEs. Three facilities have three or four staff FTEs. Custody levels and facility differences were not tracked for the outside focus groups because participants in those groups were not divided based on different facilities or custody levels.

Section One: Outcomes of Prison Library Use

The first goal of this project was to identify outcomes of prison library use. These included outcomes related to developing prosocial behaviors, information literacy and learning skills, and preparing for successful re-entry into the community.

To identify outcomes, we mainly focused on answers to the following questions asked during our focus groups:

- Why do you use your prison library?
- In what ways, if any, has your prison library experience changed how you feel about yourself and/or others?
- Have you ever connected with someone because of the library or because of something you've learned in the library?
- Has the opportunity to visit the library changed the way you behave in prison?
- Overall, how do you feel about your prison library?
- Are there any other stories about your experiences with your prison library that you'd like to share?

When focus group participants were asked, "Why do you use your prison library?" the most frequently applied codes to their responses were: "information access," "escapism," "collection," "pass time," "music," "self-led learning," "reading for enjoyment," and "library services." The codes "library as an activity," "mental health," "library as a place of peace," and "movies" also appeared but less frequently. This indicates that people use their prison library both for obtaining information and for recreation, such as movies and leisure reading. Additionally, individuals use their prison libraries as sanctuaries of peace and as spaces to work on their mental well-being.

When asked, "In what ways, if any, has your prison library experience changed how you feel about yourself and/or others?" the most common codes identified in the responses were "self-led learning," "connect with others," "library services," "information access," "mental health," "positive feelings," and "prosocial behaviors." By asking this question, we aimed to understand if library use can foster empathy and self-awareness, two key traits associated with prosocial behavior. A detailed discussion of the specific services used in prison libraries is included in Section Two, but what follows are insights into the outcomes participants identified related to their use of prison libraries.

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIORS

"Prosocial behaviors" was an overarching parent code applied to any excerpts where a person showed

an awareness of how they interact with and affect others. Nested within "prosocial behaviors," there were more specific child codes: "agreement," "connect with others," "democracy," "donate time/resources," "empathy," "expressing appreciation," "helping others," "leadership," "respect for others/property," "role modeling," "social norms/normalization," "turn-taking (within focus groups)," and "work with others." All these child codes appeared in our data. Many of the prosocial behavior codes, although applied to both men's and women's focus groups, were identified at a higher rate in women's focus groups than in men's. These included "empathy," "helping others," "expressing appreciation," and "respect for others/property." The men's focus groups, on the other hand, discussed the prosocial behaviors "role modeling," "donate time/resources," and "democracy," more frequently than women.

Prosocial behavior codes could also be associated with different custody levels. "Expressing appreciation" and "respect for others/property" were observed more frequently in focus groups conducted with people in Minimum and Minimum Restrictive & Below custody levels. The prosocial behavior code "work with others" was identified at the highest rate in focus groups of people in Close and Close & Below custody levels, two groups with very limited social interaction on a daily basis.

Looking at inside groups, the least frequently identified prosocial child code was "democracy," which appeared in only eight transcripts. The most frequently identified prosocial child code was "connect with others." Below, we examine four of the prosocial behaviors that may result from prison library use: "connect with others" (in 53 of the 62 inside and outside transcripts), "respect for others/property" (in 35 of the 62 inside and outside transcripts), "expressing appreciation" (in 33 of the 62 inside and outside transcripts), and "helping others" (in 26 of the 62 inside and outside transcripts). Occasionally, participants used the term "prosocial" themselves to describe their time in the library, with one focus group participant who was formerly incarcerated stating, "[The] library is a very prosocial environment for prison, probably one of the most."

Within the eight focus groups conducted on the outside, connection with others and "respect for others or property" were found in all but one transcript. "Agreement" was also noted in seven transcripts, which is a much higher rate than in the inside transcripts. Conversely, "helping others" was less common in the outside transcripts compared to the inside transcripts.

CONNECTION WITH OTHERS

Connecting with others is a strong marker of prosocial behaviors. It was identified in 46 of the 54 focus groups conducted with currently incarcerated people and seven of the eight outside focus groups. Only a few of the excerpts identified came from participants saying they had not connected with someone because of the library or something they learned there. Most mentions of connecting with others were positive, such as the example, "Sometimes you can read something and it would, once you bring it up to somebody, they relate to that same thing that's in the book and that's what creates a friendship bond . . ." The code "prosocial behavior " was often applied in response to the question, "Have you ever connected with someone because of the library or because of something you've learned in the library?" as in the following example:

Speaker 2:	Especially in lockup. I came across a new author . . . So I pass that on to my next door neighbor and we read a few of his books and we have insight about the books.
Interviewer:	Oh, cool.
Speaker 2:	And exchange of what we feel about the book. So yes, I have relayed with people about books.
Interviewer:	Okay. Yeah, it's a little book club with you and your neighbor.
Speaker 2:	Man. I mean, 23 hours locked down, you got to vent so we can talk like this. Instead of talking about something

negative, talk about something positive.

In response to this question, one participant even used the term "prosocial," and then unpacked the term:

Speaker 5: . . . because it creates a prosocial environment, you know what I mean? You start a book and everybody's in here doing it.
Interviewer: What do you mean by prosocial?
Speaker 5: Like everyone's sitting here interacting with each other, even people you don't normally talk to.

When reflecting on their time in the prison library, one participant in the outside focus groups referred to the library space itself as a reason they were able to communicate and connect with others:

> A common ground type thing. That's what I found in the library too. I mean when you go to the library and there's guys in there, man, it's more social than anywhere else. You can go to this. "What's going on man? What you reading? Hey dude, I'm reading this. What's going on with this?". . . the library is like common ground and you can always go to somebody and say, "man, what is that that you was reading? Because you look real interested" he said, "it's a good book, man, I'll show you where it's at." And everybody, it's just neutral ground. There's no funk in the library.

Another focus group participant reflected on how the library offers a space to overcome social barriers:

Speaker [?]: Yeah, the library's not political.
Speaker 5: Yeah, it's not. It's just you only got one. One room.
Speaker 3: When you're in a library, you don't get to. . . I'm not going to kick it with the whites or Blacks or Mexicans. It's just all. And it helps you break down stereotyping. Because he could be super involved in passion novels and he can be like hardcore gangster novels.

These types of interactions function as a way to find new materials and relate to others, as shown in the interactions described by this participant:

> I've noticed too like. . . Me and this other girl, we had a similar liking of the type of books and the way they're written. So it was always fun to see what books she was reading at the moment. And then every time I would find a book in the library, I would go and show her, look at how good this book looks. And so being able to know that this person enjoys that specific type of writing and type of fiction or genre, that the book is fun to connect with someone on that or when other people enjoy that type of stuff too. It's a thing that you guys can connect on that's a healthy thing.

When talking about their interactions with the people around them, another focus group participant said, "We get together and remind each other it's library day." There were many excerpts that highlight the link between connecting with others and prosocial behaviors:

- Yeah, I feel like it's connection when we all sit together and do something in here. Because up in the unit, we're all just doing our own thing or whatever. So when we sit down and watch a movie or ask, "Hey, what book are you reading?" It kind of brings us closer together.

- Coming here and then when you're new and being in here with people from your pod, sometimes you find out that they like reading the same books as you; so just being able to form connections just by seeing what other people are reading, I think it's super huge to be able to do that, to feel better and to feel more connected with others and with yourself.

One focus group participant stated, "It's a meeting place and I like to be, I like to associate with people who are interested in becoming more, improving

themselves." Another participant also spoke positively about the people they were able to connect with in the library:

> [. . .] when I first came to prison, I was a hard-headed kid who clearly made these bad decisions and then compounded them bad decisions by making more bad decisions. So when I started coming to the library and I started getting more into books, it's different when you come to the library because there's a different element of person that hangs out in the library and reads books compared to the ones that are in the pod making trouble and picking fights with other people. So getting to hang around with people who are a little more into books and a mellow lifestyle . . . You start to get a different perspective on life and you start trying to change your own ways. So that's how it's helped me. I got to come to the library and meet a different kind of person and see things in him that I like to try to emulate.

Some respondents described how the library or something they had read there helped them empathize with others and communicate more effectively.

> [. . .] the spiritual books and stuff . . . I kind of be up in them, too. Because it kind of gets you spiritual balance with yourself . . . It kind of teach you other people energy. So if you feed off another person's energy, so really you got to humble yourself to overcome any situation that you're facing nowadays, no matter what it may be. And talk about it in a nice tone and be sincere about it. So that's what I've been learning in the library, self-teaching and learning all the other folks' actions. And know how to deal with people with problems, that don't know how to deal with their problems. And tell them how you feel about situations. So that's the little remedy I got up out of the hood.

Someone else explained how sharing materials in the library helped them to tackle difficult subjects with loved ones:

> I gave my lady a title of a book for her to check out because she wanted to understand more. I told her, "This isn't going to be an easy process because a lot of people can't handle being with somebody that's going through a transition. This is a book that can help you to understand a little bit more of what body dysmorphia is and what I'm going through in my mind and what a struggle it is going through this process and having to correct people constantly and feeling down about myself." I go through up and downs with emotions a lot. My body's trying to level out with the testosterone and with the estrogen in it. There's a book in there that I told her to read and she's checking it out and it's helping her a little bit to understand more I guess. I want to be able to tell my mom about it, but that's one person I'm kind of scared to come out to. But hopefully when I get out I can send her that book and have her read it. I don't know.

Directly in response to the question, "Have you ever connected with someone because of the library or because of something you've learned in the library?" the code "connect with others" was applied in 28 of 54 inside transcripts and five of eight outside transcripts. Besides connecting with others in the facility, library use and reading helped some focus group participants stay in touch with family. For example, one participant answered, "Just to interact with your kids just on some books to get them involved in books. Or y'all could just read the same book. I think that'd be pretty cool." In another focus group, a participant explained, "I read books in here and I'll go and hop on the phone with a family member and I'll just tell them what I'm reading, with that kind of converse on that."

One focus group participant shared that the library helped them connect to their family by learning about their interests: "my daughter plays violin, so I would like to learn how to read music a little bit better so that maybe I can pick up an instrument with her." And another participant shared their excitement for Family Day, when they will perform the ukulele skills

they learned at the library. Not only are these both instances of prosocial behavior through connecting with family, but they also both demonstrate how people use the library to learn new skills.

Besides staying connected with family, participants also discussed how they use the library to connect to the wider world. One respondent said, “It helps connect you to the outside world, I guess, through reading and watching movies, or listening to DVDs that would otherwise be unavailable to us here in this prison setting.”

Library use and reading also helped some participants improve their own communication styles:

> Like learn how to talk to people, be like, "Hey bro, I feel like can I talk to you for a minute?" Don't make him feel like that I'm kind of like, if I come to him, like, "Hey bro, I need to . . ." That'll make him throw his tactic mode on. You know what I'm saying? Like I'm trying to attack him. But if you come with some, "Hey bro, can I talk to you for a minute, whenever you have time?" You know what I'm saying? He be like, "Okay, I got you."

In another excerpt, participants described how it expanded their vocabulary:

Speaker [?]: Another way it helps is it's helped me expand more on . . . I'm going to be honest, it's helped me expand more on my vocabulary. I didn't have quite the best vocabulary. Consisted of a lot of slang.

Speaker 5: Or know how to talk to people. That's how I've been, too.

Speaker 4: Throughout reading books in the library, I've been able to expand my vocabulary and be able to learn how to talk to people in certain ways. And not approach them, because if I come at someone, I'm like, "Aye," and I use any type of slander that I may think is okay, they might think is wrong and it might not be the right way. This also helped me with my vocabulary, because if I'm sitting in a job interview, if I say the N word every other word, they're going to be like, "Yeah, you're definitely not getting hired." So it's kind of helpful in that way, too.

The excerpt above illustrates how improving one’s communication skills can assist with re-entry into society outside of prison. Another participant described how using the library to stay connected and communicate helped them prepare for re-entry after their release:

> For me, it's really helped me understand that I can communicate with the people out there. I used to think that there was a huge barrier between those guys out there and me in here because none of the stuff that I was doing in here had anything to do with what they were doing out there. But the information that we could share back and forth about businesses, like I said, what I've [inaudible] and businesses and taxes and stuff like that, it's really actually between me and my cousin, it has allowed us to build a really good foundational relationship of this is what we're going to do when I get out there and what we're going to do when I actually do get to that world. So it opens up a line of communication just by having knowledge and I love it.

Working in the library also helped a participant explore a new career path and build a professional network. They secured long-term, stable employment with an organization that provides prison programming.

Connecting with others can also be passive, as described here:

> Coming to the library, watching different people use different music and how it makes them feel and how you see how this guy who is kind of depressed goes into a completely different state. Another guy is reading a book

and you see their whole vibrance change. And then it makes you think completely different for that person. Instead of just being like, "Oh they need some help that I can't give them." But then the library is giving it to them because they're getting the help that they need through their therapy, through music or through just being able to get their mind off of whatever it is with that reading. And just to know that there's things out there that they can get help from. And that not to necessarily feel bad for them because they might just be down waiting for that next time to get that uplifting joy.

Multiple focus group participants explained how they gained a better understanding of people after observing them in the library.

Speaker 5: A positive thing about the library to me, I mean you get to see different people. You learn the different people who observe different people. Like you say you might be in the library and one of the hardest guys on the yard or [inaudible] hardest guy on the yard, he come over and he's searching for a book on Dungeons and Dragons or some kind of game that you wouldn't see him engaged in. So it gives you an outlook on how people react away from their general crowds.

So I mean, I've been to the library and I used to have a client that worked in the library, so I would have to go over to the library to pick my client up and I would see guys in there that I would see on the yard walking around with their chest poked out and this and that there. But they over here read the book on fairies and dragons and this and that. Then I'm like, okay, wouldn't expect that. But it teaches you. It also lets you interact with other people and get to know people outside of their environment because it seems like they let their guard down when they're doing their thing, they're in their moment.

Speaker 1: Their facade is broken.

> Seeing what people are actually interested in. You think, oh, this was just a hardheaded knucklehead or something like that, then you see him picking up the dictionary and he's trying to learn something. Or he's picking up something that's trying to benefit him in some type of way. Or even myself for example, I'll come in here and I'll be like, oh, I'm just going to come walk around. I want to get out of the pod for a while. But then I find myself getting indulged into some fairytale land or something like that. I mean that's a big thing right there.

While using the prison library, connections could also occur with library staff. One participant stated, “I used to connect with a lot of the librarians.” And another focus group member described their connection with library staff: “I think I have a good connection with the librarians. They're pretty helpful. And then they won't treat you like you're an inmate really. Some people that work here, they'll treat you like you're just an inmate and that they're better, but the librarians aren't really like that.” Another participant shared:

> It really just brought us together with the workers or even the librarian. She's told me about a couple books and I've gone and found them. And it just kind of opens up that barrier, because we tend to shut down and keep within ourselves in here because it's easier that way. So being able to have some type of common ground has helped.

We also heard from library workers who described their experiences as library clerks, which often included stories of connecting with library users. For example, one participant said, “There’s been a few times that since I’ve started working here where I’ve gotten to meet people in different pods and find out we have certain stuff in common. But I wouldn’t have known that before because I wouldn’t have taken the time out of my day to talk to them if I didn’t have to,

being in here." Over and over again we heard how prison libraries help people open up:

> It makes me a little more sociable. I'm not . . . from the beginning, I was a real sociable person and then as I got older, I kind of closed off. But whenever you come here, there's people just sitting around reading or listening to music or I haven't really had a bad experience with it. There's always the librarians that are walking around, "Can I help you with anything?" It helps me be a little more sociable.

RESPECT FOR OTHERS/PROPERTY

Throughout focus groups respect was shown by participants for the library space, the materials in the library, and people in the library, including staff. The codes "respect for others/property," "expressing appreciation," and "social norms/normalization" Behavior Modification" and "library as a place of peace" were also applied multiple times alongside "respect for others/property." Participants described how people behaved differently in the library because of their respect for the space and the importance of keeping peace within it. This reoccurring sentiment is summed up well by the following excerpt:

> And it's crazy that even though it is super wild in the units or anything, even the wildest unit, if they come in here, everyone knows that it's the library, so it's time to be quiet. So it's just really beautiful because everyone knows that you be quiet in the library, and it's like a sacred space almost. So it's just really nice to see that even though we are in prison, everyone has

overlapped quite a bit. In addition to showing respect, participants voiced the significance of being treated with respect in the library. For example, one person explained:

> And I remember the first time I came into the library here, I grabbed the Poison series and I was checking it out and the librarian walked up to me. And she was like, "Oh, I love that series. What do you think of it?" And it kind of threw me off because that's not the way I'm used to interacting with authority from where I came from. And so I was skeptical and I was nervous the first few times that she talked to me. But it kept on like that. The librarian kept, "Oh I love that series too."

Another participant emphasized why it is important to be treated with respect. This same participant, who earlier stated, "libraries are institutions that help dignify us," told interviewers:

> [. . .] there should be some legislation that every prison, any institution like this should have a library. I mean, it would be in the best interest of society, recidivism rates would come down, education, everything. But we don't live in that type of world, unfortunately. Like I mentioned, you have resistance and I'm pretty sure that's what you're up against and that's what you're trying to prove. But it's not easy and to that respect I appreciate your guys' effort. Libraries are in every sense, they're just an essential part of humanity. You come to read, you come to learn, you escape this environment, everything . . . It's just, why would you even have to present that as an argument? The same could be said for recreation. It's there for a reason to help us release stress and whatnot. Those are positive things. You shouldn't take that away from inmates. You should give them more of that. You should give them more education and give them more library. You should give them more recreation. They should treat us like we're human beings.

that shared respect and acknowledgement that this is everyone's quiet space.

EXPRESSING APPRECIATION

"Expressing appreciation" was a prosocial behavior observed when people voiced their gratitude or thankfulness for any aspect of the library or the experience they were currently having. People often expressed appreciation for the prison library and its staff: "I'm glad we have a library. A lot of places ain't got access to library. And we can always complain it could be worse, we can always complain it could be better. So I'm thankful that we have people in the library that do try to help. I'm grateful for that." Another participant in the outside focus groups stated:

> I just feel thankful. Even though the system's flawed, and it might not be perfect, but it is an opportunity, especially facilities where you're locked down 3, 4, 5, 6 weeks at a time, and you have the opportunity to go to a library and get something to read is better than not having anything at all. So, I'm just thankful that there actually is a library there that we can access at some point in time.

In 15 of 54 inside transcripts and three of eight outside transcripts, "Expressing appreciation" was applied in conjunction with "Staff Assistance" or "Staff," or both. One participant said:

> She's [the librarian] amazing, helpful. She's very knowledgeable. She knows where things is and she's well-read. So she's able to point you in the right direction. And if you're stuck on where you kind of go next, she knows where to go. So I think that's really positive.

People also acknowledged that the librarians are not always in control of the barriers to library use: "[Redacted] used to be a librarian. She's not no more. She was great. They're all respectful. They work hard for us when they can. Sometimes you go on lockdown and stuff like that for different situation, and they can't get to us, but that's not their fault." Another participant who worked in the library described how one librarian was able to make a significant impact in a short period of time:

> And what she did in this library in two months, three months was amazing. She took 1,500 books off that were missing or lost that no one had gotten around to in years. We went over to that new numbering system . . . We got in, I don't know, 2,000 new books and we were all working double time and just she got this place squared away in a heartbeat. And then she got promoted up front so we lost her.

Focus group participants expressed appreciation for professional librarians as well as for currently incarcerated people who work in the library. One participant said, "The guys that work here are great, too. They're very helpful. He works here. And I know when I do come through, I've been in classes with him here at this facility, the other courses and very helpful. You know, never a negative experience coming in here. So that's good." Focus groups often ended with participants thanking interviewers or expressing appreciation for the project, such as, "Well I think what you guys are doing here today is very important. I would like to thank you guys."

HELPING OTHERS

"Helping others" was a prosocial behavior observed in 23 of the 54 inside transcripts and three of the eight outside transcripts. People most often mentioned helping others when asked, "Have you ever connected with someone because of the library or because of something you've learned in the library?" and "In what ways, if any, has your prison library experience changed how you feel about yourself and/or others?" They described helping others access materials within the library or the library space itself:

> Speaker 3: Usually the girls would just ask someone to go for them, or if you're close to people, you ask them if we could go instead of them this time, and we'll rent a book for them or whatever.

You know what I mean? If they want a book, we'll get them one, and then we'll be able to go.

Interviewer: So there's some cooperation there?

Speaker 3: Yeah. Communication between us.

People also spoke of helping each other get through tough situations by reading books:

> When something bad happens here, like someone gets denied parole or something, I have books and I offer them to them. I'm like, "Hey, this is a great book, you're going to love this." And it keeps people's minds off of things. And it really helps. Like she said, a lot of inmates here have mental health issues, so escapism, even uplifting stories, things that they can empathize with. It all works out great because we need that and we need that connection with other people, just talking about it.

One focus group participant, who worked as an Offender Care Assistant, explained how the library supported patients with dementia:

> I mean . . . we deal specifically with the dementia patients. This old guy that we lost last year, would love just coming up here and putting on the headphones. And music seems to trigger a lot of happy memories with our guys, so we try to bring them, show them some old pictures, or let them listen to music. And it's just a good, relaxing place.

People also said that the library is a space where they can always find help, whether from librarians or staff who are also incarcerated. One participant described receiving help with accessing technology:

> You get assistance here, every problem that I've had, somebody help me, even if I wasn't able to work the computer, what they have in this library, the computer access to that, somebody always came and helped me with that.

One person working as a clerk in the library explained that helping others creates a unique environment in prison that is important:

> I used to work in the library. It was my second job here and I worked in here for over a year. And it just was great. The environment was great – it not feeling like prison. And so then also being able to be a clerk, you were able to help people, and just in this environment, that's not always what we can do. And so just being around, that was super important to me and my incarceration.

Focus groups showed that the library is a place where people can help each other in meaningful ways. Opportunities to help others were not always available outside the library. Both those giving help and those receiving help seemed to benefit from these interactions.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

In approximately three out of every four focus groups (conducted with both currently and formerly incarcerated people) people acknowledged that their behavior changed because of the opportunity to visit the library. Although not categorized with specific codes, several groupings of behavior change were identified. These included "staying out of trouble" and instances where the library positively impacted people's perspectives, mood, or thinking, leading to different behaviors. Here is an example of a respondent discussing how the library helped them to "stay out of trouble":

> It gives me something to look forward to. It gives me the incentive to stay out of trouble, because if I get in trouble, then I'm not going to be able to come to the library or do anything else, go to rec or anything. I guess, more or less it has helped me focus on things that I want and things that I need. Because the library, just because is small, it does help you with a lot of stuff that you need. So yeah, it has changed my thought process on certain things for sure.

One participant described ways that library staff offered incentives for good behavior:

> So the librarian there started a program that if you were cool, if you exhibited positive behavior while in ad seg [administrative segregation] for that month prior to that, she would allow you to have books sent in to donate to the library. She would let you read them first before they processed them into the library system. Or actually, they would be processed in, and then she would allow you to read them. So yeah, that was kind of the Pavlov dog type of training there.

The following excerpts exemplify a shift in people's perspectives which then influenced behavior:

- I think it does make a difference with us because say, coming to the library, being able to look at books, being able to read or listen to music does affect people's behaviors because I've noticed after the library, everybody's in a good mood and relaxed, and they come back to the pod, and they're behaving. So, it plays a big impact on people when they get a chance to step out of the pod and come down here. So the libraries do help.

- I would say maybe like he said, that it does help you decompress. Sometimes, just being in the pod is too much sometimes. You just want to come in here, you do your own thing. You feel more, I guess, meditative. When you go back to the pod, you're not on that same bad vibe anymore.

One focus group talked about how being treated with respect by library staff could influence behavior:

Speaker 5: I think it just changes your perception when people treat you different instead of you're an inmate and being disrespectful with you and . . . When you sit there and communicate with a person, I think it makes you think about life differently, especially when you've done a lot of time. You know what I mean? . . . And that's what I noticed about some of the facilities that I've been at. The staff members that worked in there are usually nice and not the whole [inaudible] closed off. I think when you close people off and you make them want to treat us like we're scum, people start acting a certain way. You know what I mean?

Speaker 2: Yeah, they don't look down now on you. They treat you like a normal person. That makes you feel more comfortable, more open than [inaudible].

In a few responses to the question "Has the opportunity to visit the library changed the way you behave in prison?" the codes "escapism," "library as a place of peace," and "atmosphere" were identified concurrently which suggests that the relief provided by the prison library contributed to behavior changes:

- It has definitely changed me because it just calms me down a lot more, especially when people in the pod like to pick on us and everything. It's like I said, a getaway to another environment just to calm down, listen to music, do something productive, read a book in a silent place without trying to read in the nighttime, and then not be reading in the pod that much because everything's loud and annoying people.

- Like I said earlier, it's like it makes you more tranquil. You come here and you have the fish, do the fish tank, you got big comfy chairs; and if you want to watch a movie, they have that too. You can check out the DVD players and stuff or the laptops or whatever they have. You pop your movie in and relax. Some people like to just, you know . . . And just sit there and just relax and it doesn't feel like you're in prison anymore. And just get away from all the anxiety and the hustle and bustle of just the drama.

One participant shared how the library helped them cope during their first year in prison, taught them how to adapt to the structure of prison life, and behave more maturely. The following quote relates behavior modification to mental health and the library as a place of peace:

> It has given me a sense of independence. It has taught me to advocate for myself. It's given me a foundation to build a balance that I can stand on when I need to get things done, when I'm trying to reach out, when I'm trying to use my imagination, when I'm trying to broaden my horizons, when I'm trying to cope, when I'm trying to be positive. When I first got here, I was a little bit rambunctious because I had spent five years in the county jail. But I would come up here and I had to get used to the rules and regulations because I could get so many books and I didn't know the amount of books that we were allowed to check out, I didn't know the amount of CDs we were allowed to check out or listen to or I didn't know that we had to put them back in a certain way or whatever; so I had to get used to the rules and the structure and the routine of the library. But by the time I reached my first year coming here, I had become more calm, subtle, peaceful, and I had grown a liking to the librarians. They have gotten to know me and everything and it just made me more mature.

People often discussed how behavior was different in the library because it was a place of peace, unlike the rest of the prison environment. One participant even described the library as "a place of stillness." The code "library as a place of peace" was identified alongside "behavior modification" 20 times. Only the code "mental health" co-occurred with "behavior modification" more frequently. The following quotes relate to "behavior modification," "library as a place of peace," and "escapism":

- Because this is something positive. This gives us a chance to get away from the everyday stress and hustle and bustle of being in the pod. Everybody being loud, running around, doing everything. We come here, when everybody come in here it's the most silent. You see people staring out the window, listening to music, others browsing books, everybody's silent, just we all thinking about stuff getting a chance to escape.

- It definitely gives me into a more stable environment. Instead of giving away to some of the chaos that surrounds us in here, and you know, it's given me a little . . . I wouldn't escape, but kind of like a reprieve, so you can kind of kick back and just ignore all of the nonsense and then read.

In this next example, the speaker actually uses the phrase, "place of peace":

> I've never had a negative time with the library. Everything in the library is what it is. I mean, there's no reason to be angry when you come to the library. If you come to the library angry, you shouldn't even come. Everybody knows the library is a place of peace. We know that, growing up in America, that's what we do. The library is still a piece of . . . a piece of still being out in the streets. Even though it's built in here, this is the only place you can get a moment of being back in the real world instead of being in prison. That's what I'm saying, that's how you should feel when you come to the library. That's how I think. I'm not coming to the library to meet somebody to fight them. You know what I'm saying? This ain't school. It's not like that anymore. Yeah, everything goes on in prison, but I've never seen a fight in a library since... And I know I've heard of stories, but I've never seen one.

In many cases, changes in people's behavior affected how they interacted with others. One participant stated, "[I]t's just my behavior towards other people. It really changed my opinion of people and less judgment. More understanding, more empathy." Other codes that co-occurred with behavior modification include "pass time," "library as an activity," and "positive feelings."

It should also be noted that there were a few instances when respondents said that the opportunity to visit the library had not changed how they behave in prison. Of these instances, most respondents gave a clear "no" in response to the question about behavior change, while a few others were less certain, as in the comment, "But at the end of the day, when you end up back to where you're at . . . we're in prison, I mean, let's be real about it. You know?"

MENTAL HEALTH

The codes “mental health” and “behavior modification” co-occurred in many excerpts. Although we did not analyze these data for statistical correlations, we observed that these themes were related. Mentions of mental health were identified in 40 of the 54 inside focus groups and five of the eight outside focus groups. The code “mental health” referred to anything relating to a person’s mental state, including mood, so its application did not necessarily imply improvement in mental health. However, participants consistently conveyed that a prison library has positive effects on mental health. When reflecting on their time in prison, some outside focus group participants described mental health in terms of staying sane. For example, one participant said, “And being incarcerated, my body's locked up, but the library kept my mind elsewhere. It kept me at ease, kept me just out of the madness.” Others spoke of staying mentally sharp. For example, “I used the library to stay mentally active.” A participant on the inside also spoke of the library saving their mental health by explaining:

> I think if I was stuck in my pod all the time, I would go nuts. I mean, like I said, I probably already am. But I would go insane and probably . . . I definitely wouldn't be as relaxed as I would. So, yeah, if we didn't have the library . . .

Another participant discussed how the library shifts their mindset and boosts their mood.

> If we didn't have a library, I'd just lay on my bed and watch TV, the mindless tube. I am pretty sure I wouldn't be in the frame of mind that I am now. I'd probably be more miserable than I am now because it gives you a social aspect. You get to come out, you get to hang out with . . . even come with one of your pod mates, come over here, hang out, and just get away from what's going on over there and do something constructive.

Section Two will cover in more detail the library services related to improved mental health.

SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation was not initially coded but emerged as an unforeseen outcome during our analysis. Self-regulation refers to instances when a person chooses to remove themselves from a difficult situation or negative interaction by opting to use library services or materials instead of engaging in a potentially harmful scenario. Self-regulation was closely tied to “mental health," “behavior modification," “prosocial behaviors," and "escapism." The act of self-regulating can be seen as prosocial because it demonstrates awareness of how one's actions could harm others. However, it also differs from other prosocial behaviors because it often involves a person choosing to self-isolate and avoid interactions with others.

Self-regulation often appeared alongside mental health because people used it as a coping mechanism. When explaining why their behavior had changed in prison, one focus group participant said, “Just by reading, like I said, reading books and staying to yourself helps me a lot, helps a lot of girls to stay in their room.” This is an interesting perspective because it shows that, while encouraging prosocial behaviors can have benefits, there were participants who also saw the benefit of keeping to themselves in the prison environment.

Another participant explained that using the library helped them avoid certain groups and earn respect from others.

> I started using the library . . . I had a 20-year sentence, so I did eight on the 20. And I just was connected to more of the politics and it just gave time away to bring myself away from certain groups. Whether they're doing positive or negative, it was just to find something else. And people gave respect to, if you have five books in your hand, they're like, “Oh, okay.” You know what I mean? “He's busy today, he's reading.” You know what I mean? Sometimes they are like, “Oh, you got a mandatory workout today. Or you got to stand out here and keep tech because somebody's doing something bad and watch for us.” You know

> what I mean? They're just like, “Oh, okay, he's got his thing, he's doing something.” And then it helps you detach.

Self-regulation was also closely connected to escapism, which we will discuss next. As one participant said, the ability to “tune everything out” can affect how someone behaves in prison:

Interviewer: Do you think that the opportunity to visit the library has changed the way you behave in prison?
Speaker 3: Of course. I don't have to be thug no more. I can pick up a book and read it.
Speaker 7: Tune everything out. Go up in your own space, your own world.

ESCAPISM

The second most common reason reported by people inside for using the prison library was for escapism. This term refers to using the library or its services to dissociate from one’s current situation, whether through reading, spending time in the library, or both. The concept of "escapism” is well illustrated by one person who said, “I used the library to escape everyday life of prison and the difficulties it brings. And just to escape somewhere when it becomes too much to deal with.”

Mental health was frequently coded alongside escapism. Sometimes, using library materials to escape helped improve people’s mental well-being:

> To escape for a little bit because we're always close custody at least, we're locked up all the time. So we only get a certain amount of hours out during the day. So we're stuck in ourselves pretty much most of the day anyway. So being able to have an escape route to just escape into a book helps with the mental, being able to cope with a lot of the stuff that goes on in close custody as well.

When people told us they used their library for escapism, they often also mentioned access to information, the library as an activity, positive feelings, and music. This quote provides an example of how someone used all these aspects together:

> I use it to do research . . . to be able to entertain myself, pass time, take a trip out of prison. I also use it as a resource for getting information as to how to do things outside of the prison as far as being able to send out letters to different places and things of that nature. I also come to it so I can listen to music and also to be with movies.

One focus group of participants from Protective Custody accounted for nearly 20% of the mentions of “escapism.” The custody level group that discussed escapism the most was minimum restrictive, with 22% of instances. These two custody groups—Protective Custody within a Close Custody facility and Minimum and Below, Restrictive Custody—are on opposite ends of the custody spectrum. This indicates that escapism is a common outcome of library use regardless of custody level.

Both currently and formerly incarcerated focus group participants talked about escapism in similar ways, with one outside participant saying, “It was a nice escape from reality too. You know what I'm saying? While everybody's doing everything in the pod, the madness is running around, you crack open a book, even a chapter or two, and just escape for a second.”

PASSING TIME

The code “pass time” was taken verbatim from some transcripts, as in “I’ll pass time.” People in Minimum Custody talked about passing time most often (25% of cases). Passing time at the library might mean just going “in there to hang out, just sit around,” the reality of life in an environment where “there’s just nothing else to do.”

“Library as an activity” is another code that was applied alongside “pass time.” One participant said, “It gets me out of the unit. Gives me something to do throughout the day.” “Mental health” was also seen alongside passing time, such as when this person said:

> Because you would go crazy if you don't have a book to read or you don't have a TV or radio, or you don't know how to do cell time or do time, period. You got to be around people that are yelling, screaming, bang on doors, and pretty much talk to yourself, and talk out loud, yell out loud all day, all night, keep you up. You can't get no sleep. It's bad. I don't know.

The ability to pass time reading is extremely important for people who are alone in their cells for most of the day. "[It] helps some mental health because it's hard being in the cell for 24 hours a day," said one person, "And you have nothing to do if you don't have a TV or nothing. The books is the only thing."

INFORMATION ACCESS

Information access was found to be the primary reason for library use. It was the single most frequently applied code across transcripts (both inside and outside). The code "information access" was used when people talked about visiting the library to find facts on a specific topic, submitting information requests, or serendipitously encountering new information while in the library. It was also sometimes used to refer to discussions about non-fiction materials.

Information access often coincided with the code "helping others," such as when someone researches a topic to share the information with family, as in this example:

> [. . .] it depends on what I'm trying to learn at the time . . . But what has occurred to me, what my son or my daughter has said to me . . . Sometimes they ask me some questions that I really have no idea. And being incarcerated right now, I really don't want to be like, "I don't know." So it gives me some time to be like, "You know what? Let me check on that, man." Just make sure I'm saying the right thing. In reality, I really don't know jack squat about it. So I just come in here and find a book on it.

People in the outside focus groups who were formerly incarcerated were able to talk more about how the information they accessed in prison libraries helped them after release. One person said:

> I was able to get all the stuff I needed to get into college and they actually helped me. They didn't just give me the paperwork and say, "Here, go do your thing." They actually helped me get my grants and all that stuff set up for when I got out. And I got out and got an associate's degree in computer-aided drafting.

Another participant in an outside focus group stated, "I got my GED, my high school diploma, all through studying in the library, and I taught myself everything that I needed to try to better myself and to prepare myself for the outside world."

SELF-LED LEARNING

The ability to access information has positive outcomes, including self-led learning. When people told us they use the library for information access, instances of self-led learning were frequently identified at the same time. People talked about three general categories of self-led learning: broadening horizons, self-help, and building applicable skills. Below are examples of individuals talking about self-led, self-help learning as an outcome of accessing information in the library:

- [. . .] I am currently going through my transition right now, so the library has helped me. They've been upgrading a lot of the books on the LGBT about transgender and stuff like that, and basically self-help books to understand where you're at. And so those have helped me actually quite a bit to understand and that's what helped me understand where I was at and why I was feeling the way I was feeling. There's good self-help books.

- When I came to prison, I wanted to not make the same mistakes again, so I studied psychology and the self-help books. Because nobody holds your hand in here; there's not a lot of classes, especially for violent offenders, so you have to use these sorts of resources if you want to make progress and better yourself.

The following is an example of someone talking about self-led general education in the context of information access in the library:

> My main purpose is to educate, to be informed, to educate myself mainly in order to expose my mind to a new idea. So, if I have a subject that I may be researching or we talk about it in a pod, debating sports or education or history, then we'll try to come to the library to try to attain some of the accurate information. Other times I had used it in order to try to get updates on public information. For example, I think two years ago they allowed us in order to file taxes, and so in that process we couldn't get the tax forms. And so the library became a resource for that.

One person summarized the impact of self-led learning by saying, "I keep coming back because I need to grow. I'm continually growing. If you don't water the plant, it'll stop growing. And so there's just always a constant need for information and to stay updated." Another participant stated that, "It expands your mind," and a different participant shared a similar view, adding that one can learn from a variety of materials:

> It helps expand your horizon. You got to read different genres of books that you normally would never read and stuff like that. So you learn more. So in a way you're learning, even though it's not in a school setting, you're still learning because you're reading different books, different genres, different authors, different styles of reading. You might be here reading poetry, or fiction, or sci-fi, or horror books, whatever.

Self-led learning also occurred when people were working on themselves and how they interact with others – a prosocial behavior. One person learned about the importance of non-verbal communication, which relates to prosocial behaviors. They told us:

> There's a lot of self-help books in here that have done a lot for me. They got a, I can't remember the name of it, but it's basically about human communication, man. I didn't know that . . . but 85% of our communication is nonverbal. I didn't know that.

Another person shared how self-reflection is important and how books in the library have helped them achieve it:

> The good is, when you're ready to just grow, you could always go find something to take your mind out of this place, to start researching and find books that will show you. Sometimes the books, they'll show you the ugly truth about yourself, and you'll deny it, but you have to really accept it, like, "Man, I really am doing this," or, "I really do have this negative behavior, and that's the part I really have to change." So that's the good part.

Learning new skills that are useful both inside and outside of prison was another direction that self-led learning took people. One participant mentioned that they read books to advance their education in their electrician career field. Another mentioned reading books about dog training "so I could stay up to date . . . just get all the information I can." The effect of learning these skills made one person feel hopeful about their life after incarceration. They told us:

> I was actually thinking about it. A couple times I came here, and I went to the section that they have books about, I want to call it occupations, like weldings, plumbings, electrical, framings, tiny homes, stuff like that. And. . . sometimes it gives you hopes. Because when you grab a book, and what you're looking through, and you see, let's say, a tiny house, and then if you're somebody like me that don't have anybody in this country, your options are pretty tiny. So, it gives you the hopes of, "Okay. I can get out and do that." It's an un-voluntarily help that it gives you a sense of being hopeful towards you getting out. Maybe that's not the reason that the book is there, but that's a feeling that I'm getting from just looking through it. Maybe I start fighting my own doubts that, "Okay. There are possibilities out there." I can get out, and do what that book was showing me.

Self-led learning to expand one's vocabulary was brought up by multiple people as an outcome of using the prison library. One person talked about how vocabulary learned in the library has helped them with their creative writing process:

> I love writing, I love journalism and so it's really helped my flow of writing. And even certain books, especially that Wicked series, there's so many words in that book that I don't even know what they mean and so I've written them down. So it's also kind of helped expand my vocabulary for different words and what they mean and how to use them. So it's definitely . . . I just really [like] reading and writing, it's just really healthy for the brain I feel.

In the outside focus groups, self-led learning was one of the most frequently coded responses to the question "Why did you use your prison library?" with only "music" occurring more. In response to the question, "In what ways did your prison library serve you well?" one formerly incarcerated participant stated:

> So, for me, I like to learn different languages, so I flourished with learning a second language, so it served me well by studying. In the particular library I had, they also had the audio, so you could learn by vocational, audio stuff, so it served me well in that aspect.

LITERACY

Not everyone can access all the information available at the library. Through our focus groups, we also heard from people with limited or no literacy skills. Although literacy was not something we coded for, we quickly began noticing when people talked about learning to read in prison or accessing the library with limited literacy. Fortunately, in most of these cases, the library was seen as a place where people could get help learning to read:

Interviewer: In what ways does your prison library serve you well?

Speaker 3: It serves me because it's educational. Not only that, but we get help here in the library and we have resources.

Interviewer: What do you mean by help?

Speaker 3: With the picture books and stuff, they have good service here. So there's always someone that'll help you find the books. And then the resources, usually we have packets and stuff of resources for people that can't read or people that are looking for re-entry.

> Well it could for sure help you build your confidence up because there's people that don't know how to read, didn't think about even learning how to read until they came here. So some people come here and they learn how to read, you know what I mean?

One participant who was formerly incarcerated reflected on how many people in prison have limited literacy and how he would try to help people read or communicate with their families:

> And I encouraged other guys to come to the library. A lot of people in DOC, I hate to say that, can't read and write. And taking another guy to the library with me, "Hey, look, come on, I'll help you write this letter to your people" and whatnot. "Let's get into this book together" or whatnot.

Another participant shared that helping someone learn how to read while working at the library was a meaningful, positive experience:

> And actually being able to help people. I actually had a guy that was a real tough, hard case. Came up, heard that I wouldn't give him a lot of crap and came up real quiet and politely and said, "I can't read. Can you help me?" And we actually had some see Dick, Jane run type stuff and I was able to help him and he was very, he actually said thank you. He was a civilized human, which is a big change from what you usually get with these guys. And that was nice. I like it when I can . . . He came over looking for certain books. We actually was able to find them, help him. That makes you

like, I did something today that meant something compared to all this crap we put up with, so.

A participant spoke of accessing the library with limited literacy skills, saying, "I use it because I can't read very well, but they have picture books that I look at. So I come to the library, plus we get the chance to listen to music." However, there was also a request for more materials for people with limited literacy, an improvement suggestion discussed in more detail in Section Three.

Although limited literacy was not a frequently recurring theme, it arose a number of times, and illiteracy disproportionately affects people who are incarcerated. It is a significant barrier to entering society, making it crucial to share this evidence we found of prison libraries helping improve literacy levels.

POSITIVE FEELINGS AND READING FOR ENJOYMENT

Women and people with access to a larger collection were more likely to mention reading for enjoyment. Similarly, both those inside and outside use recreational reading as a form of self-care, as shown in the following examples:

- For me, it's part of my me time, like self-care. It helps me to just kind of relax and get into a book and depending on the book I am, I'm always excited at night to get back into the story of where I'm reading from. So it's kind of a coping mechanism for me to just get in bed and read and just get away from the world for a bit and relax in my book for a while.

- If you can find a world that is created in these books and just go there instead of participating in the negativity that is here in these units. You can come here and find a positive place to be in, even if it's just by yourself and minding your own business. But it's nice to read a book. I really like it.

- I just remain thankful that I did get to read the books that I did. To this day, I have a library card around my neck because I still go to the library here, the Martin Luther King one. Even they don't have all the books that you want. That's just the way life is. I would agree with him. If you don't have a book, you pick up another one. You're not guaranteed a great experience, but such is life. But, I did 13 and a half calendar years in prison. I didn't read before that. I started to read in prison, and I'm really thankful, really super thankful because I still get up two hours before I have to leave to work. Even if it's at five in the morning, I get up at three so I can read a book right when it's peaceful and it's quiet out. That's just something I enjoy.

The final question we asked participants was "Are there any other stories about your experiences with your prison library that you would like to share?" Overall, "positive feelings" was the most frequently identified code in responses to this question. "Positive feelings" was applied to any instances where a focus group participant expressed a positive feeling toward the library, regardless of whether they used the word "positive." Here is one such response:

> The staff's well-trained with knowing their selection books. A lot of them read their own books and they tell me they read this book, that they think I'll enjoy this. They seem to know their fiction from non-fiction. They're all pretty well-trained in every prison I've been to. Like I said, I've been in close custody, so it's cell to cell, or it's when I went to [redacted] and then the inmates ran the library there. Even the inmates are pretty knowledged, know their stuff, so it was pretty cool. No complaints. I think it's ran perfectly.

Having "positive feelings" as the most common code used in responses to this final wrap-up question in the focus groups accurately reflects the compliments and appreciation people expressed when given the chance to comment on their prison library.

In response to the question, "Why did you use your prison library?" a participant who was formerly incarcerated stated:

> The librarian was amazing in letting us make flyers for opportunities that we had inside the

> prisons. But as far as support groups, AA, church proceedings, she helped us make the flyers ourselves, which built my confidence, and each time they got a little bit better. I was always very proud of them, and it was something that I got a deep sense of accomplishment from. So the library, for me, for many different reasons, was a positive place to go.

Although not specifically a measurable outcome, it was clear that the library had a positive impact on people. Across all the inside focus groups, "positive feelings" were coded 209 times, while "negative feelings" were only coded 39 times, and "neutral feelings" were coded 32 times. In other words, roughly 75% of the instances where people talked about their perceptions of the library were positive remarks, and only 14% were negative. This speaks to the overwhelmingly positive view of prison libraries among people currently incarcerated. Perceptions in the outside focus groups were more mixed, with 58% of perceptions coded as positive and 34% as negative in outside transcripts.

CONCLUSION: OUTCOMES OF PRISON LIBRARY USE

Focus group participants shared a variety of positive experiences, ranging from using the library to escape their current environment to connecting with others. One participant shared all of the above:

> [The library] gives people a place to escape or go or find themselves or to communicate with other people . . . gives people a safe haven to do what they need to do. You know what I mean? And become something different.

This was not the only participant to mention the idea of personal growth or finding oneself in response to this question. One participant responded, "But certainly these places are an environment to promote a better human being." These responses show that, not only are possible outcomes of library use that people learn things or behave in prosocial ways, but also that significant personal growth can stem from using the library.

In conclusion, the stories and experiences shared in response to our questions revealed outcomes of prison library use related to developing prosocial behaviors, information literacy and learning skills, and preparing for successful re-entry into the community. One focus group participant even identified the library's role in all of these outcomes. This participant argued that "education reduces the crime rate," and added that "[redacted participant's name] over here, [is] learning to read ... he could really utilize that in finding a job and becoming a better member of society and not coming back to prison." This response draws a clear connection between the ability for incarcerated people to educate themselves in a library, successful re-entry, and prosocial behaviors.

Section Two: Library Collections, Programs, and Services Associated with Positive Outcomes

The second goal of the PRISM Project was to identify "What types of collections, programs, and services are associated with positive outcomes of prison library use in the view of the service users?" The answer to this question primarily drew on responses to the following focus group questions:

- Why do you use your prison library?
- In what ways does your library serve you well?
- Do you use the library for personal reasons? To participate in specific program activities?
- What's your favorite or most memorable experience you've had in the library?

Simply because a code was not applied frequently does not mean that it is not worth mentioning. The table

below displays a range of library service and program codes that were applied to both inside and outside group transcripts, but will not be analyzed in this paper. Rather, Section Two focuses on the services and programs that were strongly correlated with positive outcomes of prison library use as described in Section One.

Table 1: Services identified in focus group transcripts but not analyzed further regarding positive outcomes.

Library Service/Program	Number of Inside Transcript Appearances (out of 54)	Percent of Inside Transcript Appearances	Number of Outside Transcript Appearances (out of 8)	Percent of Outside Transcript Appearances
GED and college classes	19	35%	3	38%
Laptops/tablets	12	22%	2	25%
Legal help	12	22%	2	25%
Book club	10	19%	2	25%
Copying machine	9	17%	2	25%
Forms	7	13%	2	25%
Video games	6	11%	2	25%
Audiobooks	5	9%	1	13%
Databases	3	6%	0	0%
Language classes	2	4%	2	25%

LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

COLLECTION

When participants in inside focus groups were asked, "Why do you use your prison library?" the second most frequently occurring library service code applied to all responses was "collection." The library's collections were talked about across all different descriptor types at relatively similar rates. The code "collection" applied either to all the materials in the library, as in its

holdings, or could pertain to a specific segment of the collection, such as encyclopedias.

Discussion of the library's collections was also found in all eight outside focus groups, which indicates that "collection" was a top reason for using their prison library. One person reflected that the books in the collection at their facility "were in very good condition," and that books that had been vandalized were usually discarded. Another person noted how organized their collection was: "You could find your book very easy and if you couldn't find it, you just asked the librarians and they would help you find it."

The collection was used for a variety of activities, including leisure reading, studying, and learning new skills. When asked how their prison library served them well, some participants noted the wide variety of books to choose from. Note that the following quote includes a statement about the library being open "a good amount of time," a pretty rare sentiment, as discussed in Section Three:

> The availability of the libraries. Most everyone I was at, you were able to go there a good amount of time, a couple times a week. So, if you did get a bad book or a bad batch of books, then you didn't have to wait that long to switch them out. And they're great books and they're incredible for killing time, especially if you're waiting to go to chow or whatever. TV's just got too many commercials for me, but I would get in a book, and then next thing you know, you're going. I liked that.

Another person remarked on how the books in the library's collection helped them grow and expand their horizons:

> Materials, for sure. . . I found a lot of books in a library, but a lot of books that spoke to me. And that really helped me mature. I went into prison when I was 23 and I got out when I was 26. So that's, there's still a lot of maturing left to do in that time. And the books that I read really helped me get through my time and learn and grow, and that's what kept me going back to the library, was just looking at finding something good and then kind of diving down this rabbit hole of whatever it may be, whether it was personal fitness, self-development, finance, just diving into all of these things and like, wow, that's actually really interesting. I wonder if there's anything else in the library that offers something in this realm or an alternate opinion to what is being presented in the book. So that's what kept me going back to the library, that and just having the opportunity to learn.

All Colorado state prison libraries have some materials in languages other than English. About four percent of the entire CDOC collection is in a language other than English (M. Bassford, personal communication, March 21, 2025). One person, whose second language is English, talked about how they used to "find a better way to communicate with little ones that I have . . . my number one reason to use it is just to improve my English . . . the only time I come here, that's basically working on the English. . . ." As with "information access," the code "collection" sometimes co-occurred with "helping others," a prosocial behavior. For example, this participant talks about using the Spanish portion of the collection to help their friend:

> If I did come to the library, it would be either to help my counterpart; he's Spanish speaking, and this particular library has more Spanish things than our previous facility we were at. So he's really interested in coming, but he's so shy he won't come by himself. So we'll help him out and bring him here, and so soon I'll be learning Spanish because it's the only way to help him out is to learn his language. So hopefully, soon I'll be coming here to get some books for Spanish and all that, which they do have.

INFORMATION ACCESS

"Information access" was the most frequently coded library service in response to the question "Why do you use your prison library?" "Information access" was discussed in 49 of 54 inside focus groups and five of eight outside groups. People in Protective Custody discussed "information access" the most frequently of all

custody levels. One person described the library as "a central hub of information," and went on to say that the library is the "only access that they have to gather tools for when they get out." Sometimes, people just want a question answered, or happen across something interesting: "Well, I go there because I like history, so I like to go and find books that's related to that, and different subjects, astrology, different stuff. Just common knowledge . . ."

Participants recalled specific titles that helped them access information, like one person who said, "It was called Auto Mechanics for Dummies . . . I read some of it, and it was informational. Gave me some insight into the automotive world." Another participant mentioned obtaining tax information from his local library. Participants also described using the library to fact-check information: "You get a lot of opinions about information. And when you want that solid, definitive answer, this is where you got to go." People also mentioned that they were seeking information about current events, as both local and world news can be difficult to obtain while incarcerated:

> They let us get ILLs in and get new movies, new releases kind of keeps you up to date on what's going on out there in society because without it, without ILLs, and movies and stuff, we're like, behind technology. We're super behind. We don't know half the stuff that's going on in the world.

RE-ENTRY INFORMATION

Re-entry information was mentioned only a few times across the focus groups, but when it was available, re-entry information was reported to be helpful. Focus group participants described receiving brochures or information packets via their libraries and said that these had been helpful. One person told us about a pre-release program (not a library program) in which they received help setting up an email, and another mentioned books that helped them learn how to make a business plan to use upon release, as well as "books on scholarships and books on what schools are available out here." A couple of people spoke about learning prosocial behaviors in the library that would help them upon re-entry. One person talked about learning boundaries and respect. They told us:

> You're in under a librarian, and she's a female so you respect her and her boundaries. And in all you respecting each other's boundaries. Usually libraries in the real worlds are quiet. So it's quiet, humble, it's a little look at stuff, just kind of keep your hand with yourself and stuff like that.

MUSIC

"Music" was the third most frequently coded library service in response to the question, "Why do you use your prison library?" Out of all 94 codes, "music" was the sixth most commonly applied code in both the inside and outside focus group transcripts. Music also came up in answers to many of our other questions, and it plays a significant role in the ways people use and experience prison libraries. One participant estimated that "90% of people use it for music." Someone else described listening to music in the library as a "must-have if I need to escape from half of whatever is going through in my life." There was also a rare sense of autonomy that people experience while listening to music: "I like to use the prison library because the music helps me get away for a little bit. It's something that I get to choose, not something that's just playing on the radio."

Within the special management group descriptors, people in the Inclusive Therapeutic Community (ITC) and people in Restrictive Housing (RH) mentioned music the most frequently. People in ITCs receive special programming for treating addictions, and people in RH have stringent security restrictions. It could be presumed that these groups are quite emotionally burdened, and their responses told us how music played a positive role in coping with emotions and mental health. Regardless of special management group or any other descriptor, in 15 of the 54 inside transcripts (roughly a quarter), "music" and "mental health" were coded together.

> Music is my therapy so we get to listen to music down here . . . I wish we had a better resource for being able to have music in our cells. That's kind of difficult at this facility, I know. But definitely

> music is one of the biggest parts of going to the library for me.

In the outside focus groups, "music" was the most frequently coded response to the question "Why did you use your prison library?" One person explained that music was a mechanism for improving their mental health. The tie between "music" and "mental health" was apparent in the outside focus groups, just as it was in the inside.

- When I was having a rough day, I'd go in there and just listen to music all day. But I didn't really use the library to my advantage. I would just go in there for a cool-off place because it's nice, quiet because you just sit in there and listen to music. It's a positive place, but I didn't really use it for what it's meant for.

- When I'd go to the library, I'd go there heated, and I could just listen to music. So, yeah, there were a couple times I thought about, "I'm going to go do something stupid after I get out of the library and maybe hopefully . . ." But every time I left the library I was a lot calmer. I was like, "Man, I'm not even sweating that anymore." I'm in a better mood, just chilling. It's not worth it. Not going to the hole because . . . Yeah, so the library is more like my calm down, peaceful place. It was like every time I entered the library I was pretty heated a lot of times, so every time I left it I was like . . . Excuse my language. But it was like if I just smoked a blunt after. I'm like, "I'm cool. I'm cool . . . Everything's cool."

Relaxation and escapism that resulted from listening to music were also identified by another person when asked about people's favorite or most memorable experience in the library:

> My best experience with the library, I just appreciated how I could go in there and just relax and just get out of my head and just listen to music and just chill, just a quiet place you could go to a better place in your head, try and just get out of the world you're in or what's going on and just sit there and just relax.

BOOKS, MAGAZINES, AND OTHER RESOURCES

Participants in our focus groups shared a wide variety of books they've enjoyed reading. A range of titles was mentioned, including The Bible, The New Jim Crow, Dune, Sports Illustrated, and commercial driver's license training manuals. We asked people if there was a book, magazine, or resource that they had interacted with that had changed their mind about something. In response, some mentioned specific titles, such as those listed above. Still, for the most part, they described how materials they'd accessed through the library had helped them to grow and develop empathy:

> She writes in a very odd way, but it's about prostitution or drug use and it's from their perspectives. And I've read a few of the books, because even in prison, there's a stigma towards drug addicts and prostitutes, and the book really opens your opinion to how people got to where they were doing those things. And it helps take the stigma away from them. Maybe they didn't really choose that or it was extenuating circumstances that led them there. And so I think that her book, specifically, really helped the stigma towards people. Because I've known quite a few people who share this opinion and they're like, "I didn't know that that's how you could get into it." Or, "That sucks that their life was so tragic and the trauma caused them to choose that path and do stuff like that." So that, I think, helps quite a few people change their opinions on how they view everyone else.

Sometimes empathy wasn't expressed just in terms of walking in another person's shoes, but in this case, a bird's shoes.

> There was one [book] that they had on birds that was "what's it like to be a bird?" There was a lot of stuff I didn't know about birds. It's just something to read. I mean, it explained a lot about those black birds that are out there and how they communicate with each other and how they can actually tell humans apart from . . . They can actually tell us apart. We can't tell them apart.

> They're actually very intelligent, and they actually can communicate and mimic our voices if they are around you enough. I didn't know that. I hear them talking out there, but I didn't know that they were actually talking because they can't actually talk, but they are having a conversation . . . Like, "What you say, fool?"

Another focus group participant told us about how a home design book "changed my mind as to what I want to achieve in life." Someone else described their learning journey and experience using prison libraries, overall:

> Phases, you just go through phases. I mean, you have a fantasy phase or you have an education phase or hobby phase, want to do cards or beading. . . You get tired of getting lost in the fantasy and now you want to make a card or what I'm done with that. Let's go figure out something else we can do. I want to learn something else. They've all taught me something and I've learned something from every book I've read. So I mean, it isn't just one book. I mean it's all of them . . .

One focus group participant described the powerful mental shift that resulted from using his prison library collection in these words:

> When you don't think there's any hope, you know what I'm saying? When you find something that catches your interest, it gives you a whole other outlook on maybe there is hope. You know what I mean? So it just kind of leads into that, especially if you come through here.

LIBRARY PROGRAMS

READ TO THE CHILDREN

Read to the Children (RTC) is a program that began in 1999 as a partnership between the Colorado State Library and the Colorado Department of Corrections. Individual libraries coordinate this program, which allows incarcerated individuals to record themselves reading a book and then send the recording, along with a copy of the book, to a child in their life. Focus group participants mentioned this program regularly (in about a fourth of the inside groups and nearly half of the outside groups), though sometimes it was because their facility wasn't offering it and they wished it were. One person expressed that RTC was the only reason they came to the library; "I don't know if they're still doing it. They did away with it for a couple weeks, so I just stopped coming." Another person told us they were eager to get to a facility that supported RTC:

> They have, what is it you read to your child and you can make a CD . . . That's something too that I've been thinking that I never thought you could do . . . But just to be able to read to your grandchild or your child . . It inspired me. I never did it before, but I'm waiting to get to the facility to do that.

RTC was a powerful program that helped people engage in prosocial behaviors. It was coded alongside a robust list of prosocial behavior codes, including connecting with others, role modeling, expressing appreciation, social norms/normalization, and agreement. "Connect with others" was the most commonly coded prosocial behavior regarding RTC. Participants elaborated on how RTC helped them connect with family, particularly their own children, outside of prison.

- And after that program, I read the book to him and she was like, "Look, it's way better to have you calling and try and read four-year-old kid books to me now than it is to have you not calling at all." . . . Just the interest you're showing meant a lot. And it was because of that program.

- Everybody that did it [RTC] loved it. But with that being said, it impacted the kids they were reading to as well, in such a way that one of my friends from over there started that process of reading to his son. And because of that, his son started coming in and visiting him. It was a relationship building thing that corrected a relationship between them, because he left years ago. And then, they started that program and it ended up building their relationship. Now he's out of prison, very successful. . . And now the relationship was built because of that. But I thought that was huge.

Another prosocial behavior that was associated with RTC was "role modeling." Participants told us that RTC allowed them to role model good reading behavior for their kids, even though they weren't physically together.

- I do like to read to the children. I have a young daughter, so it's a way to keep in contact with her, keep her reading and stuff like that because you read, they get to see the book, the child gets to have the book and they also get to see you reading. So it's a good way to keep in contact with your family.

- I thought that had a huge impact for us to connect with our family on the streets. It didn't have to be our children, it could have been to anybody, our loved one, which would inspire the younger generation to read out there if they see us in here that we're reading to them. So, in reaches like that I think had a huge impact.

In the outside focus groups, two people mentioned RTC when asked about their favorite or most memorable experience in the library. The first person said that RTC "was the best thing I've ever done in the library, to tell you the truth." The other person elaborated on this experience and its long-lasting impact on them and their family:

Speaker 5: They didn't have it when I first came down and I wasn't able to interact with my kids . . . So they have a face to go with that voice when you're reading to them. So that was the biggest thing for me because it let them know who their grandfather was and it also showed the kids that my grandfather loves me. It showed my kids that, my dad loves my kids . . . who don't want to interact with their kids being locked up when you can't see them . . . you put it [the recording] in the mail and they don't know it's coming and when they get it . . . it lights their face up.

Speaker 4: Christmas!

Speaker 5: My dad or my grandfather sent me this here, so I got a voice, I got a face to go with who I'm talking to on the phone. So that was a big thing for me . . . they still have the books, they still have the video.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

We heard about a variety of group activities hosted by the library, including game nights, movie watching, trivia, and more. Availability of certain activities seemed to be inconsistent, but people tended to find them meaningful and simply fun. Trivia night was one group activity that one person brought up, saying that they appreciated "Just being able to kick it with friends and laugh and joke and have fun." Then they added, "I wish that they do it [trivia night] for close custody sometimes, even if it's just for the close custody girls. Just because it's just to lay back and just laugh and be with friends and stuff like that." Trivia night was also a catalyst for seeking out information, as seen in this excerpt:

Speaker 2: I mean, [librarian] sometimes has . . . activity night. And then last month did a thing on Dr. Seuss, had a questionnaire on it. It was pretty cool. I mean, that gives you incentive to go around looking for books about Dr. Seuss, and she had them in certain areas so it wasn't just on the one table here. It's all [inaudible]. You had to actually do work for it. So it was kind of cool . . .

Speaker 4: And I think the trivia . . . Then she hands out sheets during the Super Bowl, for Halloween, Thanksgiving. You had to guess when the first Thanksgiving was. A lot of people don't know that [inaudible] because it was a holiday that was actually sanctioned by George Washington at first, and Abraham Lincoln actually followed up on it and made it a national holiday, stuff like that. But you'd have to come to the library to get the books in order to research that information if you didn't already know it.

Another person linked group activities with three prosocial behaviors: helping others, empathy, and social norms/normalization. This person actually used the

term “prosocial” in their explanation of why group activities are valuable:

Interviewer: So more like what a public library would do with programming and also displays and things like that, to show that thought.
Speaker 3: Yeah, most definitely
Speaker 4: To be more prosocial and to encourage engagement.
Interviewer: Okay. What do you mean by “be more prosocial?”
Speaker 4: Just like some of the things that he was saying, being able to come in here to maybe participate in some type of games. Maybe be able to have spoken words, poetry, some people that don't know how to read about it, maybe be more engaging for them, have space for that. Maybe people that are blind or deaf, just having that access and just marketing to them to let them know that they're seen.

Watching movies together also came up in our conversations. “At the end of the month, you get to watch a movie,” said a participant, “And you could bring in Little Debbie's, or a soda, or some popcorn or whatever, watch a movie. It was really cool. It was really great.” This person expressed disappointment when the program disappeared along with the librarian who had started it. They went on to tell us about some group gaming programs this same librarian had implemented, including Dungeons and Dragons and Gamers Unplugged, saying, “It was really cool.”

The outside focus groups also mentioned “group activities” as a positive library service. When the group was asked about their favorite or most memorable experience in the library, one participant shared a story about a poetry writing contest held at their facility. Another person talked about chess tournaments being a “social gathering with positive themes being at the forefront of it.” One library connected books to the program as well, then went beyond that and made the program a conduit for charitable giving. Charitable giving was coded as the prosocial behavior, “helping others,” and was mentioned in another focus group, also (though it’s impossible to know if the experience was shared at the same library or not).

> For me, the [redacted] library was super proactive. They were always trying to bring not just books and materials, movies, but also activities such as knitting classes. They were always trying to do something different to expand our mind through learning, and there'd always accompany a book with it, like How to Knit. They would teach us and then send us home with a book and a little bit of yarn, and then we would do projects for the community, for the veterans. As far as making scarfs, I thought that was a great opportunity to give back to the community but also just to learn. I just love the environment that they had there. It was always transitioning to something bigger and better.

LIBRARY SERVICES

STAFF

Staff played a vital role in curating beneficial experiences in the prison library. “Positive feelings” and “staff” were coded together 22 times in the inside transcripts, whereas “staff” and “negative feelings” were only coded five times together. Comments such as, “Over here, they just treat you how they want to. But with the librarian, she's pretty cool. She treats us like a person,” were evidence of the ways that library staff contributed to their patrons' experiences and well-being. This idea is also reflected in the comment, “I think it just changes your perception when people treat you differently instead of ‘you're an inmate’ and being disrespectful with you . . .” This group goes on further to explain the effect that this sort of treatment had on them:

Speaker 4: I've always got that since I've come to the library with this librarian and the one that was here before. Since they weren't COs [correctional officers], I think they came in with a different perspective on how to treat people. I think that in and of itself makes a difference.

Interviewer: So how does it make you all feel to have a librarian or staff person that communicates and seems to–

Speaker 6: I think it changes a big deal for everybody in here.

Speaker 4: Well, it makes you feel like you're more human instead of like you're scum or something. Like, "We don't want to talk to you."

Speaker 2: Got somebody above you thinking you're just a piece of [redacted].

Speaker 3: A robot.

Speaker 6: That's just like how she keeps the door open. When I was here in 2017, they used to close the door, and they wouldn't allow you to come in or out unless the movement was happening.

Speaker 4: Yeah, and Ms. [former librarian] had started doing that, too, and then they told her, "You got to close the door," so, yeah, it changed.

Further to the notion of patrons' well-being, or the ways that libraries serve the whole person, the range of services that library staff helped with was also important, as was their own experience as library users. One person told us, "The lady that usually works in here when we come down is usually really cool about everything. So she'll even help us find books and stuff like that . . . it's good customer service . . ." Library staff helped people find books and music, and learn technology skills, as described here:

> And I like the way that they help because I don't really know how to use the computer and so the people will get on the computer with me and they'll help me do what I need to do and if I am looking for a book or I can't find it, I just like the help that they provide for me.

When participants discussed staff serving them well, a couple of prosocial behaviors also emerged. Instances of "expressing appreciation," for example, were clear when people reflected upon their experiences with librarians such as one person who commented on librarians as a whole saying,

> "Y'all [librarians] are different. You do what you do and it helps people no matter what whether they realize it or not."

Others went on to say:

- As for the library ladies and men, they're real kind to help you out . . . They're here to help you read or find a book or how to listen to music. They'll take their time to help you out. That's pretty cool.

- She's [the librarian] amazing, helpful. She's very knowledgeable. She knows where things is and she's well-read. So she's able to point you in the right direction. And if you're stuck on where you kind of go next, she knows where to go. So I think that's really positive.

One group explained to us how it's actually the librarian, not the library, that made their prison library experience positive.

Speaker 2: Plus we have a great librarian, because she makes sure that if you need something she's going to let you know, "Go fill out this slip." But she's not just going to put that slip in her desk or whatever and just forget about it. She's actually going to . . . That book will be here, or whatever you need, or whatever information she could provide you with. So she takes pride in this library. So she does a good job and she keeps us up to date. She also, she has a good attitude about interacting with us, so that helps out a lot.

Speaker 4: That makes a big difference actually.

Speaker 3 : That's why I said this is the one I like. This facility, especially.

Speaker 4: [inaudible], it's trash. It really makes a difference, the library. The lady who runs, or the person that . . . I shouldn't say the lady, the person that runs the library. Huge difference.

Interviewer: So that's something that's the people in the library, not like the library itself?

Speaker 4: Yeah, the staff.
Speaker 2: Right.
Speaker 4: It's a huge difference.
Speaker 2: She keeps this library pretty good. When we got evacuated for a while . . . So we packed this library up, everything. But by the time we got back she already had it unpacked and all the books on the shelves and everything where it needs to go. So yeah, that just lets you know how much pride she takes in this library. So that helps a lot when people actually really . . . When she cares, it rubs off on us. We care about the things that come out of the library. So when we take them out of here, we make sure that we bring them back in. They're just like, we took them out of here.

In response to the question, "In what ways does your prison library serve you well?" participants shared stories about librarians and other library staff who were "on their game" and made their experience in the library a positive one. In about one-third of inside focus groups, "staff assistance" was coded in response to this question, as it was in half of the outside groups. The number of staff had no influence on how often people mentioned "staff assistance" in a positive light. Participants discussed "staff assistance" the most when they had three full-time equivalents (FTEs) at their library, but the group that talked about staff assistance the second most often was the group with 0.2 FTE (the smallest number of FTEs in any facility). Most of the excerpts that were coded with "staff assistance" pertained to information requests, fulfilling interlibrary loan (ILL) requests, and locating materials. Some individuals noted that library staff even assisted patrons when they were unable to visit the library in person due to security restrictions.

> I mean here we're so confined, like, everything is brought to us, you know what I mean? . . . They're [the librarians] real good at like coming and interacting with us, because we have no interaction . . . You see this? It's glass . . . The librarian, like she comes and she'll sit there and talk with you, and, you know what I mean? Recommend things. You know, you've read this one, how about this? I was looking into this, you know? . . . It's pretty good.

In our outside focus groups, we also heard how staff assistance played a role in positive experiences in the library. One person even noted that their interactions with their librarian were the best experience that they had in the library:

> Just positive experiences there. The librarian at [redacted], she was a good lady. If you'd go in there with an idea of a book that you want, she would take you in there and Google it and then show you all the different options and stuff. So she was the most helpful librarian that I've ever dealt with in DOC, to tell you the truth, and I've done a lot of years in DOC. So [redacted] probably was the best library for that reason. She would get you what books you needed or wanted or were interested in. She always would. The turnaround was pretty quick, too. It was maybe two weeks at the most. So, best experience in the library has been [redacted.] She's doing something right.

SOFT SEATS

The code "soft seats" was mentioned in nearly 20% of the inside focus groups. Soft seats are emblematic of the comforting landing space that the library provides in an otherwise challenging and harsh environment. Except for "library service," the code that most commonly co-occurred with "soft seat" was "library as a place of peace." People in Protective Custody mentioned soft seats by far the most frequently (79% of instances, after accounting for the proportion of total focus groups). People in facilities with the largest collection size also mentioned this code most frequently, suggesting that beyond an expansive collection, sometimes the best service was simply a restful place to sit. This is, in part, a result of budget and space constraints at smaller facilities, but the sentiment rang true regardless. One person said, "I know you may take this for granted, but after 17 years of this, sometimes it's just a soft place to sit." Some statements were simply about the utility of a

soft seat, like one person who said, "I come to sit on the couch. It's comfortable." Someone else joked that they'd joined the focus group just for "all these cushioned seats." On a deeper level, though, simply having a soft seat can cause a positive mental shift. "And we come in here and they have comfortable chairs instead of steel chairs, instead of concrete chairs," said one participant, "so, this environment is conducive to us psychologically in a liberation aspect." Another person told us that their most memorable experience in the library did not relate to the collection, but rather was when the library changed the chairs:

> Oh, I mean it's as simple as when they changed the chairs and they brought these comfortable chairs in here. Just to come here and sit in these kind of chairs. It sounds simplistic to probably the people from the streets, but for us everything's hard and cold in prison. The concrete and metal. So just to come here and read a book in comfort.

INTERLIBRARY LOAN

Of the 24 services mentioned by inside focus group participants, "Interlibrary Loan" (ILL) was the fourth most talked about. ILL services enabled library patrons to delve further into niche topics, read a series to completion, or simply read something they love and can't find, despite the limited collections available in prison libraries. One person told us:

> Here in this library, the ILL is a big, big benefit of utilizing this resource here . . . this is a smaller facility, so the library isn't huge here, doesn't offer a whole lot. I mean once you've read what you like to read, it doesn't leave a whole lot, so the ILL program is huge.

ILL was also remembered by people in the outside focus groups as a key library service, as in this example:

> I would use it [the library] mostly for things that I wanted to learn about that I was interested in like building sheds, raising chickens, all kinds of stuff, stuff that people there don't know about. So I would do interlibrary loans mostly, just because the libraries are smaller, but the interlibrary loan at the last prison I was at did really well.

Another person recognized ILL as one of the services that kept them coming back to the library. They said, "Yeah and that [ILL] was something that was really cool and helpful in getting things that they didn't have there. So that got me back in there a lot, too."

CONCLUSION: LIBRARY COLLECTIONS, PROGRAMS, AND SERVICES ASSOCIATED WITH POSITIVE OUTCOMES

As seen in Section One, prison libraries have a wide variety of positive impacts on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The services, materials, and, in essence, experiences that these libraries provide, as well as the staff that make it all possible, lead directly to those impacts and outcomes. People read and listened to music that altered their state of mind, got answers to questions, small and large, and serendipitously stumbled across information that changed their minds and behaviors. They honored the human tradition of passing stories to their children, or engaged in leisure time in a comfortable environment with a soft chair. They connected with others through shared interests, activities, and offering or receiving assistance. For those people who already identified as readers and sought library services on their own, and for others who learned about it from someone else or just stumbled upon it, library services turned out to be vital–as in the words of one focus group participant who mused,

> "Because without it, imagine?"

Section Three: Possibilities for Improvement

The third goal of the PRISM Project was to identify how prison libraries can be improved. We drew from responses to numerous questions to find answers to this question, especially the following:

- Did someone else—for example another incarcerated person, a staff member, or a family member—encourage you to use the library or did you find it on your own?
- In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?
- What obstacles or challenges made it difficult for you to use the library as wished?
- Is there a negative experience you've had with the library that you're willing to share?
- What could prison libraries do more of, do differently, or do better to serve people while they are incarcerated?
- What should be the top priority for improving prison libraries?
- Overall, how do you feel about your prison library?
- Are there any stories about your experiences with your prison library that you'd like to share?

In answering these questions, the following themes emerged. Naturally, there is a good bit of overlap between the codes, showing that even for all of the positive outcomes and impacts associated with prison libraries, there are quite a few obstacles, and accordingly, opportunities for improvement.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO USE

The code "barriers to use" was the third-most common code used in coding inside focus group data, after library services and collection, and the second-most frequent code used across outside focus groups, after library services. "Barriers" to use encompassed a number of child codes, such as "policies," and "security restrictions." "Collection," regularly overlapped with "barriers to use" in the inside focus groups, as did "staff." In total, the parent code "barriers to use" or specific barrier child codes were present in 52 of the 54 inside focus groups.

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic was an obvious impediment, with everything being locked down and restricted more than usual. Some of the changes that took place as a result of COVID-19 persisted even after the pandemic had subsided. Participants described lots of other factors that further inhibited their library use beyond COVID restrictions, beginning first with learning what services were offered at their respective facilities.

The schedule of interview questions focus groups answered started off with how participants had found their libraries. Participants in 41 of 54 focus groups conducted inside of facilities said they had found the library on their own, as opposed to learning about library services from someone else, either staff or a peer, as in this example:

> I found it on my own. I didn't even know they had a library here when I first got here. So I had to discover it on my own, asked a few questions and then . . . Well, when I first got here, it was in the heart of COVID, so this was totally shut down.

This speaks to a need or opportunity for improvement, such as promoting library services through a brochure or bookmark, or offering orientations to aid in library discovery. "No, there wasn't nobody pushing nobody to the library where I was at," one participant in an outside focus group said.

Focus group participants also talked about instances where they were discouraged from using the library, not only because of short staffing or obstructive policies such as wait lists, but in some instances, where facility staff limited access. "The guards would lie about not having passes to give so we wouldn't ask to go," one participant from an outside focus group said. Another person shared, "Some COs would simply claim an emergency and not allow inmates to go."

Controlling for discrepancies across descriptors, women spoke more frequently about barriers to use than men. This was true for the following specific barriers as well: open hours, capacity, the library not having what they wanted, financial barriers, borrowing quantity limits, policies, security restrictions, time allowance, being unfamiliar with the systems, and conflicting work schedules. In the one facility where men and women share the same library, inequalities between their access to the library was discussed openly when a focus group participant said that the top priority for improving

prison libraries should be, “Some more equality with the females and the males because males get a lot more opportunity to come and we get twice a week for what, two hours?” The trend of barriers to use being mentioned more frequently in the women’s focus groups did not carry across to the code “social barriers,” as when someone could be discouraged by someone else. This was identified more commonly in the focus groups conducted with men.

The code “security restriction” occurred frequently as a “barrier to use,” and appeared in more than half of all focus groups, including those conducted with people who are presently incarcerated and those on the outside. In some facilities, services such as book cart delivery enabled library access even when in-person access to the library was not allowed. Security restrictions also co-occurred with information access and censorship. “It was/could be uncomfortable due to being a sex offender,” one participant said, explaining that his informational requests, such as “ideas to tattoo or seek knowledge” were never approved.

“Policies,” another child code of “barriers to use,” was also closely related to “security restriction,” and applied even more frequently than security restrictions. “It’s like The Hunger Games,” one group said about attempting to use their library. “Yeah. It's like, if you feel like arguing . . . It's a sport to come here, then great. But if not, I'd just rather not. Yeah, but it's rather sad.” Policies that represented barriers to use included time allowance, open hours, capacity (number of people allowed to visit at a time), financial (such as fines or fees), quantity limits, and borrowing time limits. Often times, several policies converged:

> I just figure it's not really the library lacking, it's more staff shortages. It's only open two or three days a week that we're allowed to go. And our work schedules don't really coincide with when we're allowed to go to the library. And there's a lot of issues like that, not just with me but with a lot of people that I know here. Because work here is mandatory, we can't miss it. But library's a privilege. So they prioritize work over the library, so a lot of us don't get the opportunity to come in and go to the library like we would like to, especially since the staff shortages and it's only available for certain times.

Focus group participants described limited opportunities to visit their libraries, as in, “I mean, just the library in general, it's not open a lot. It's only open maybe four hours a week or something like that.” The code “time allowance,” was mentioned in the majority of the inside focus groups, as in this example:

Speaker 2: Maybe more opportunities to go to the library. They got a schedule and there's only a few times you can go to the library or there's only a certain amount of slots, like the first 15 and you got 100 individuals.
Interviewer: Okay. And that's just the first 15 people to get in line.
Speaker 2: Are the first ones to sign up. And some places I've been, you might see the library maybe once a week, maybe twice a week. So more access to the library or also more people to have access at the library instead of maybe 15 because it could be the same 15 people that pure run to the door real quick and sign up and it's not enough opportunity for everybody else.

The following excerpt was collected from an outside focus group, and speaks to time allowance, open hours, and capacity:

Speaker 17: At my facility it was only open one day a week . . .That sucked.
Interviewer: For how many people too.
Speaker 17: There's 500 of us there. There's only one day a week.
Speaker 13: 20 people in at a time.
Speaker 17: Yep.
Interviewer: And is there a time limit?
Speaker 1: Oh, yeah.

Other groups had similar conversations about the limited availability of their prison libraries, including open hours, time allowance, and capacity:

Speaker 6: Yeah, the facility I was at, it was only open twice a week and then the hours, I mean you got to hurry up and get there. They only allow so many people in there and you have to wait. So that was the other thing that was bad about it.
Speaker 9: A lot of them are small.
Speaker 6: Small. Yep.
Interviewer: And so, they can accommodate few people or they just have very few offerings?
Speaker 9: Yeah, well [one facility] library was new so they only had a shelf and a half of books for a year and a half. It sucked. What can you do?

These restrictions influenced the quality of people's experiences using their libraries, overall, as described here:

> I guess it just depends on what facility you're at. But I know the facility I was at, you had to pick or choose. Either you listen to music or either you look for a book and they only gave you 30 minutes. So it's like you had to, okay, well I want to do both. But you can't, you know what I mean? So like you said, time is limited when you go to the library, so that's kind of an obstacle when you go in there you kind of got to figure out what you're going to do in there. 30 minutes is not very long.

Borrowing quantity limits were spoken of as a barrier exclusively in focus groups consisting of people in Close Custody or Close & Below custody levels. Focus groups of people in Close Custody or Close & Below custody levels also spoke most often about security restrictions being a barrier to library use. Restricted access to prison libraries relates to "support of libraries," insofar that one of the most impactful ways to improve facility libraries is to re-evaluate the necessity of policies such as time restrictions and fines and fees. One participant told interviewers,

> "[Administrators] think that there's more important things than library when it comes to prison. But I don't think that's true."

"Support of library" occurred as a "barrier to use" in about one-third of all of the focus groups. This was usually in regards to prison officials rather than from peers, as in this example: "Yes, only allowed to go like once a week and if you are a fast reader [you] have to reread the same book. Also guards would make [a] huge issue about going. Too many people to try and go for one hour a week."

One focus group participant flipped barriers into an incentive, telling interviewers, "If it was things that were incentivized with coming to the library, staying out of trouble, doing good, you might get to go on the computer or you might get to do this or do that," maybe people would behave differently to gain or maintain access. Another focus group, conducted with previously incarcerated participants discussed their similar experiences:

Speaker 9: I feel grateful, and it's still, I think the word I would use is a little underserved, I guess, that just sometimes it goes on the back burner, but I think it could go a long ways to helping more people if it was in the forefront of people's thoughts, or if people understood how much it can help.
Interviewer: So, you're saying that, if I heard you right, the prison library could play a bigger role in prison culture?
Speaker 9: In keeping, yeah, I think if they were adequate sized with better selections that it would go a ways towards keeping people occupied. People get frustrated when they get in and they can't get what they want. Or you're right, I mean, everybody does when they can't get what they want in some way or another. Well, nothing's different in prison. You can't find a book you want, you get pissed off or whatever. Things escalate.

You're crawling all over people to get a book, it gets frustrating. So, I don't know.

The inability to access library services oftentimes occurred due to other conflicts, as when, "There was a schedule for each pod and unit and it got mixed up a lot so there were often days we would go without library." Participants in one focus group described that library services were viewed as a "dollar on a string," and that administrative processes and rules were unclear:

Speaker [?]: Mine is mainly the lack of materials that are needed, the missing books. At one time when I first got here, we could check out the games, the board games, for a short period of time. I think it was like three days. But then all of a sudden that stopped and they're like, "Well, so-and-so decided, so that's it." Well, nobody gave us an option to say, "Hey, what can we do to keep this?" Because this was one of the reasons why we came to the library. But they said nope. They were going to institute game night where we could, during our scheduled time if we wanted to sign up for games, you could sign up for the game and you come in on that night and play a game or whatever. One of the board games or whatever for the hour. That went nowhere.

Speaker 6: It's like, you tell us we can do something and then you're like, oh, nope. So, that's a dollar on the string.

Focus group participants also talked about policies and barriers to use regarding music. One focus group discussed how loaning CD players would help to alleviate overcrowding in their library:

> I think it would be nice to have more units able to do so and allow them to have the portable CD players back at the unit as well as more CD players because music is an outlet for a lot of people and I think it would help their mental health, it would keep a lot of commotion down because a lot of people can't afford the radios on the canteen.

Music was mentioned in answer to the question, "What could prison libraries do more of, do differently, or do better to serve people while they are incarcerated?" Again, this raised the question of format, as in, "if we didn't have to rely on CDs and we had tablets in here, so we could literally just look up whatever music." There was a call for more variety across the board. "Probably give us more options," one group said, referring not just to music, but to library collections in general–a common theme, and another suggestion for improvement.

IMPROVING COLLECTIONS, INFORMATION ACCESS, AND LIBRARY CATALOGS

IMPROVING COLLECTIONS

The code "collection" was used 347 times across all of the inside focus group comments, making it the most common response to the question, "In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?" In about 20% of those instances, collection co-occurred with "barriers to use." For example, one outside focus group participant shared, "Since many books were not available it often discouraged me from even wanting to go back into the library." The condition of the books also contributed: "I was discouraged because most of the books are old and torn."

While many participants used interlibrary loan (ILL) to obtain pre-determined titles, the experience of browsing physical collections was described as essential. Participants expressed frustration about downsized collections and empty shelves. The code "ILL" appeared at times in response to the question "In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?," often describing service inconsistency.

A varied and relevant collection can be a strong motivator. One person, when asked if others encouraged them to use the library, responded:

> Well, found it on our own. Plus, you got other people that always talk about the library and then you see when they come back to pod they got some cool books that you wouldn't even think would be in, especially in here. You know what I mean? You think it wouldn't be like that. So then it kind of encourages you to get the motivation to come down and check it out for yourself. You know what I'm saying? So just seeing other people coming with some cool stuff and then you're like, "Damn, let me see." Then they letting you check it out. That gives you that motivation to make your way down here.

In this way, the library acts as a prosocial motivator. Good collections alone can inspire engagement and social connection. Unfortunately, participants repeatedly described poor collections as a norm. The code "don't have what I want" was applied to 37 of 54 inside transcripts. Incomplete series and outdated materials were common complaints: "I used to read a lot, but one of the reasons why I stopped coming is because of the lack of the completeness of a set of books."

The codes "collection" and "don't have what I want" often overlapped with other barriers, reinforcing patterns of discouragement.

> Why come into a story halfway through it? Then when you try to get the end or the missing piece, it's like, "Well, you can't ILL because we don't have the staff," or "You can't ILL because we don't have access to the material at the time." There's always something stopping me, and it's like, you know what? With the amount of time I have, I just don't feel the desire at the time.

Some also voiced concern about eBooks and their limited accessibility, especially when titles were available only in digital formats. This excerpt, also tagged, "unfamiliar with systems," captures that concern:

Speaker 2: Something that I encountered on a book was that it wasn't even offered on paper. I ILL'ed a book and it said that it was only offered on eBooks to read it.
Speaker 4: Yeah. I have encountered that too.
Speaker 2: And that was new. And things like that they won't even give us, because we've problems with it. So I don't know if that's just the world changing or if that's even a thing. I've been in prison almost eight years and now I can't even get a book because it's not even on paper? What do you mean? We can't have the little iPad thing because people hack it? Come on. That's not very nice. I need to know what's happening next.
Interviewer: I like reading a book, a physical book. Real paper too, and I really do love it.
Speaker 3: Yeah.
Speaker 4: Yeah. eBooks are a thing now. That sucks for prisoners.
Speaker 2: Yeah, it kind of threw off the whole series. And it's the only book I had that problem with out of the whole series.
Speaker 4: See? Yeah, they do their exclusive, eBook only things.
Speaker 3: Yeah.
Speaker 4: And those suck.
Speaker 3: That's frustrating.
Speaker 2: I don't even know what that is.
Speaker 4: I mean, thanks. I'm glad it's free, but I can't read it.
Speaker 3: Yeah. Great help.

Not being familiar with how systems work is a barrier to use that could be addressed through library orientation or other outreach initiatives. In one new, minimum-security system–where other barriers to access were limited–lack of familiarity with library organization was one of the only barriers to use.

Some excerpts were tagged with multiple codes, as in this example, in which collection, barriers to use, policies, "don't have what I want," and "censorship" were all applied:

> And I would say that there's reasons there's certain books that are not in here, but I think it should be a freedom of information thing. I mean,

> of course they don't want you to learn [to] build bombs and stupid stuff like that, all that. But why wouldn't they want you to learn psychology? Why wouldn't they want you to . . . A bunch of different things that maybe they just haven't got them in here. I don't know if they have a reason they don't, but should be freedom of information, really. I mean there's some security issues, I understand. Books that cause security issues, but how [does] psychology create a security issue? It shouldn't.

The need for self-help books was common across all groups. So was a call for more variety and better consistency across facilities. Policies and local decisions shaped what was available:

> Then the books we got in, they started coming in in droves. . . . 70 books on transgender [issues]. Empowering women. There's no women at this prison. There's three types of books that people want here. Westerns, fantasy, Star Wars this or that, or urban fiction. And then you have the guys that want research. Probably as far as research on the back shelf goes, crochet. We cannot have enough crochet books. I mean, good Lord we can't get enough crochet books. But every book we were getting, everybody was like, "Eh." We have the new section. Everybody just put them back. When can we get what we want?

The purchase suggestions that focus group participants shared leans heavily towards non-fiction, though urban fiction and manga were in high demand as well. Other topical interests include self-help, spiritual, and non-Christian religious books, plus memoirs. Subjects that could help prepare people for reentry include these as well as books on business and parenting. Language learning materials were also in demand–Spanish language, but also Swahili, and we heard requests for African and Native American history. Crafts, such as beadwork and crochet, were also of interest. One person was interested in reading about cars and planes.

"Censorship," another child code to "barriers to use", was also applied in our inside focus group transcripts. People in facilities with smaller collection sizes spoke more often about censorship than participants in larger prisons with larger libraries and collections. Oftentimes, censorship co-occurred with the code "policies."

Speaker 2: Yeah, different genres of books. Personally, some of us look more toward urban fiction books, you know what I mean? And I feel like they're kind of against all urban fiction books. If they have more urban fiction, I feel like the library would have more use. It's just something that . . . We can more relate to urban fictions.

Speaker 3: It's the lifestyle that a lot of us were living or live on the outs, so they restrict us from reading urban fiction.

Speaker 2: And I feel like they kind of think that it influences us in a way, and it doesn't. What we read out of a book isn't like, "Well, yeah, we're going to go try this and see if it works for us." We kind of know at this age that that's not really true and that we're not going to be as lucky as people in the books. We know that they're just books, but they're more entertaining to read.

Another focus group participant said the following, also in regards to urban fiction:

> It's the urban fiction books that connects everybody in our pod because like, "Oh, do you got this book?" "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll go grab it real quick." And then we pass books around and it just is a, "Oh well, that person has that book right now, so you have to get it from them." Type of thing and I don't know, it's just . . . Mainly, most of our pod we read a lot of urban fiction. I think that's just a lot of us grew up in that lifestyle, so you relate to some of it, I guess.

But urban fiction was described as a target for increased scrutiny in more than one conversation, such as the following:

Speaker 3: I feel like it's some of the restrictions they put on the type of books we're able

to have here. Most of it, especially in this, we're all younger, so we like reading urban fictions or super vivid books. And however you look at it, negative or positive, some people might look at urban fictions like negative. Some people might look at it as positive. Regardless, it's still a book, and the library should offer it because it's a book. The book is doing no wrong. But here, they deny those type of books, like pick and choose what comes in. And other facilities have it. You go to an adult facility, and you'll have those books. But here we don't have those books. We're all adults here the same way. But for some reason they put restrictions on us having those books at this certain facility. And I don't think that's right.

Speaker 5: If you have a horror book, like we have books about serial killers, like actual documentaries about serial killer books. But we won't have an urban fiction, like a tall tale, like a fairytale. You won't have a fairytale book, whatever. You could get a real book on El Chapo's life, but you can't get a made up story here.

And it's those stories that, it's not like we're looking up to those books and getting ideas or nothing like that. It's literally, instead it's like watching a cartoon movie . . . Like we're a kid, we don't want to watch no long factual documentary. We like watching maybe cartoons with a lot of stories, a lot of different characters. That's what the urban books provide for us. But we can't get them here and I don't know why.

Interviewer: And is that all urban fiction, it's just a no go?

Speaker 5: All yeah.

Interviewer: It's not title by title?

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Speaker 5: No, you won't catch not one.

Several focus groups offered their theories on why administrators choose to censor books, as in this example:

> They'll sidetrack. They'll give you, just to throw you off the blind . . . put you some blinders on for you can't look the whole opposite way. You know what I'm saying? They don't want to wake up your third eye. Or when you be mentally woke, they want to keep you mentally dead. When you get mentally woke, physically, you know what I'm saying, you'll be like, "Okay, I see what you're doing before." You see it a mile away. Then you don't got to does this. As long as they keep you blind and stuff, like he said, they won't see the books that you really need to better you to cope within a situation without causing circumstance on your behalf. So they give you little fun books. It's strange though.

As noted earlier in this report, another focus group discussed the importance of being able to access self-help books and books about LGBTQIA+ issues, specifically, transitioning. Libraries that have not yet made these items available in their collections–or deliberately censor these materials–can improve their services by making sure that these resources are accessible alongside other material relating to healthcare. Another focus group participant said:

> For beginners, first grade, whatever you want to call it. Pictures, just things that people that get interested in actually picking up a book and say, because if you can't read, you're going to get discouraged to go to the library. You're not going to really come here. I can't even read. You see what I mean? So like he said, if we can get the books that are just barely starting off that can help a person read, starting off reading or whatever, I think that's important. I think that's very important. So that's one of the things I think. Education. I mean, I've read every kind of whatever western you want to think about, but I never really stuck with it that much. . . And me, that's me personally. When I read something educational, I think it's much better for me. I sit there and read something that'll keep me going

> for a couple hours or whatever, but then I'll get discouraged. Then I'll read a Spanish book or something, English or whatever it is. History. I like that.

Literacy levels — and providing books at a variety of literacy levels — and in different languages, also came up as a "barrier to use" and a way that collections could be improved. "Because you can see all the English books. We only got a few shelves right there that are Latin or Spanish," one focus group participant noted. Another participant observed:

> The only thing I really think they need more of is the picture books that they do have were limited to just those. They could use some more books, like easy books to read, and books for people that can't read the picture books and stuff. Because some of the libraries I've been to [one facility], here, and [one facility], they don't have big selection of easy books to read. That's the only thing vaguely that was with it. But if they got more books like that for people that can't read, then it would be really good.

IMPROVING INFORMATION ACCESS & CATALOGS

Access to newspapers and periodicals was another request. Nine inside focus groups and one outside group mentioned the lack of newspapers:

Speaker 4: [I liked] to go read the newspaper so I can actually know what was going on in the world, especially the sports section and stuff. So it was a nice spot, and then all of a sudden they got rid of it.

Speaker 7: You get the newspaper and it was cut. There'd be sections just cut out.

While TV is sometimes available, participants described it as biased or insufficient. Newspapers were viewed as more accurate and essential:

> [TV] is really slanted a lot of times. So in order to actually get a full scope of everything, being able to get that access in the library with your monthly periodicals for your information, it helps you not be so skewed in one angle so to speak. Does that make sense? Along with regular reading books, but yeah, we wanted to keep up to date.

Some wanted access to multiple newspapers to compare viewpoints: "Even being able to have the option to look between the New York Post and the New York Times, I mean, that's your left and right wing so you can at least make your own decision on how things are."

Others expressed a need to keep up with local and global events:

> [You should] have a couple of editions here, like a local news, national news and global newspaper. That'd be cool. And then weekly be able to come down here, monthly even, come down here and get a glimpse of what's going on in the world . . . getting the news, it's quite important.

Focus groups also talked about the lack of and need for re-entry materials, as in the following excerpt from participants who have recently returned to their communities:

Interviewer: What about access to re-entry materials? Were you able to do any sort of research for where you're going to go or sober livings?

Speaker 1: That'd be great. That'd be great. [My facility] only had a sheet with all the halfway houses, that's as far as it went. That's as far as it went.

Speaker 4: They didn't have it in the library at [the facility I was in], but they had an actual pre-release to where you can go and research stuff like that. But in the library they didn't have any of that.

Speaker 1: The thing with pre-release though, that's a funding thing that they get money from, so that's the only reason they have that resource there . . . But they just had a list, which is all the halfway houses and you had to call them or write them yourself. But no real resource.

The need for more information to help prepare people for re-entry was prevalent across focus groups with people who are presently incarcerated, and especially in focus groups conducted with library users who were formerly incarcerated. Providing information relevant to re-entry is a clear way to improve library collections on the inside; 95% of people who are incarcerated will return to their communities, after all (Bureau of Justice, in 2004). Several focus groups discussed "information access" in respect to ways that prison libraries could be improved, as in the following discussion:

Speaker 6: The big thing in here is normalization right now. So if we're going to do a normalization across the board, we should have access to current smartphones, things like that, so that you can learn how to use these things because there's some people in here that have never used them, and then they're going to leave and they've never had access to those things. iPads, tablets, things like that, so that you can learn the skills that you're going to have to use once you leave this facility.

Speaker 5: Yeah. I think that's the main, the technology aspect, more access to things, to search or computers, even just learning how to type, typing programs and things like that. All of those very basic things all the way to using a smartphone, all of those things are so important to be able to know how to do.

Speaker 4: But if we didn't have to rely on CDs and we had tablets in here, so we could literally just look up whatever music-

Speaker 3: Yeah, that's cool.

Speaker 4: I don't see why we wouldn't be able to use a tablet in the library. I think that that would be a place where we would be able to do that because it'd be monitored and there would be things in place to where we can't, like, go on to social media and stuff like that.

Speaker 1: I think also more books on law would be very helpful because a lot of people are . . . Of course, we're all surrounded with law right now and we're just ignorant to it. Like, what's new? New bills that come out. How can we stay up to date on things happening out there? You don't catch the news. You don't know. So I wish we had more information or more access to stuff like that.

Other focus group participants talked about the benefits of health information, such as:

> I have found, when we have the tablets a while back . . . they had these built in stuff that comes with the tablets and they have stuff on your house, cholesterol, how do use the prison libraries, how to do exercises, they got calculators. They had a few variety of things that was really beneficial . . .

The ability to find information on a certain topic, and to see what books and other resources are available in a library is a critical component of information access. While most library users are familiar with using their library's online catalog to search for books, this experience is far from common in prison libraries. Although the PRISM interview schedule did not include any questions about catalogs specifically, participants talked about wanting better ways to find out what was available. These comments sometimes corresponded to the codes "barriers to use," "information access," and "accessibility," and to questions about how library services could be improved. This excerpt describes using the print catalog in lieu of accessing the library due to security restrictions:

Interviewer: Okay. What could prison libraries do more of, do differently, or do better to serve people while they are incarcerated?

Speaker 1: Like I said, they can fix the book. The way the book is. They could fix it, make it more easier to read.

Interviewer: The one where you select books from?

Speaker 1: Yeah, the one where you select books from. It tells you all books in there. Some

people can't read books that are 900 pages. You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Speaker 1: So I think that they can get more books that are easier to read, maybe bigger prints, something like that. They definitely get more manga, Chinese comic books and stuff like that. People like to read that. That's really it. I mean, considering the custody level we are here, there's really not much they can do. When it comes to that. Because we're high security, like I said, we don't go to the library. There's no contacts. You know what I mean?

Digital catalog access is not the norm across prisons in Colorado, but one focus group participant in a facility that does have online catalog access explained how it worked:

> We have Chromebooks with the library catalog already on it. We have five different wings and each wing has shelves like these with books on them and we have shelves with music as well. Instead of having to go look at every section, we can actually get onto the Chromebook and look and see what we have available or see if somebody has it and when we can get it next. That helps with the accessibility.

Another focus group participant described their experience of exploring eBooks from a prison library:

> They have tablets. . . I don't know, pretend to know the logistics of whatever they did, but there's just a huge catalog of books available on the, there's a kiosk that you have to plug into and you can browse all the books on the kiosk and then download them to your tablet and you can read like a Kindle.

Even where prison libraries are providing their patrons with access to their catalogs in some format, focus groups made clear that there is room for improvement. For example, one participant said, "And the murder mysteries, you're looking for a murder mystery and then you only find one, but then turns out there's a bunch at the library." Another person had a similarly frustrating experience:

> They give us this catalog that just has some of the books in it, and a lot of those books have been lost, damaged, destroyed. So sometimes you put in a slip, and it takes two, three weeks for them to tell you that we don't even got that book no more.

Another person explained:

> You had to order them on a piece of paper, what books you wanted and some people didn't even know what books were up here. So it was by [word of] mouth because the catalog book that had all the books listed in them wasn't either updated.

Someone else told our team, "They canceled a lot and they never updated the computers saying what books were available."

Having access to the library's catalog is especially critical for those people who are not able to visit their library in person, whether due to a security restriction or other constraints. Focus group participants also explained that catalog access helped them to plan for their library visits, an important consideration given time allowances and other barriers to use, as described here:

Speaker 3: We have our catalogs, but they're not really doing a good enough job by saying this is what we provide in this genre or this type of spy novel versus this type of educational novel. We kind of got to dig through the catalog when we come to the library. And the library doesn't always have a spot open for us. So a lot of the time we spend in here, we're just looking for books instead of being able to do that on the unit with the catalogs that we have in a better way.

Interviewer: Okay. Sorry, I just keep harping on this, but are you able to see the catalog beforehand and prepare, or is it like you

have to look at the catalog here, you have to do your ILLs here and you have to get your books?

Speaker 2: [inaudible]. Yeah, know what you want.

Speaker 3: [inaudible] everything in one shot. Everything in one shot. And that sucks.

Speaker 2: Prepare.

Speaker 3: You got to prepare, like you said, a couple of weeks before. If you see something or think of something like, "Oh, I got to make sure I do this the next time." Like I said, be prepared for it for sure. But then sometimes it's not even a guarantee that what you're preparing for might be here this time, because somebody else might've jumped on you. You might have to wait another week or a couple of weeks or a month.

One outside focus group also discussed their questions and frustrations regarding catalog access and the ability to find books in their library and beyond, through interlibrary loan, as in the following excerpt. The interviewer asked, "Could you guys go and look up in a book, a list of all the books that are available out there? How did you find out the books that you wanted to order?" Participants then responded:

Speaker 10: You pretty much just had to know what you wanted. I mean, they have a computer there that you can look, "mystery books," and it'll pull it up on the computer and stuff, but it's only for that library at the facility.

Speaker 7: I was just going to say the ILL system, the librarian has to look up the books, and she can search for the catalogs. But, if your facility has its own catalog, but the ILL system's different. And I think the library when I was at [one facility] was saying it would be nice if we were able to search the ILL from the catalog system just to be able because . . . Yeah, that's more or less what I have to say. And then, it would be nice if we could renew the ILL one time or something because, as I previously mentioned, it's two weeks I think or so that you get the ILL or you have access to ILL, and then you have to return it.

MEETING STAFFING STANDARDS

Ensuring that prison libraries have trained staff is another possible way of addressing many barriers to use. Library workers make it possible for libraries to be open and provide assistance in navigating systems and accessing information. Ideally, librarians also safeguard the freedom to read by fighting censorship and protecting their patrons' privacy, as recognized in this excerpt:

> It's very difficult because we only have two librarians, and so they're trying to get everybody in on the two days that they're allowed to, and take the requests. Plus they have to put in the ILLs, they have to return the books. They have a couple workers here that help, inmates. But it's difficult and we understand that they can't always get to it, because due to the privacy and everything, they have to hand-deliver this stuff to us. It's not something they can let the inmates do. The librarians have to do that.

Outside focus groups also talked about staff shortages, or the importance of fully staffing libraries as a key improvement:

> Just staffing. I mean, just as far as giving that accessibility to people. It seemed like that was always, everywhere I was, that seemed to always be the reason why the hours were short, or you ended up missing days, or you had to go a couple of weeks without going in.

Another person told interviewers:

> Librarians, they'll assist you, they will assist you here, so that's not the issue. I'm going to use the word prisoner, the prisoner to staff ratio is kind of large. You got a lot of prisoners in here and then a small amount of staff.

Someone else suggested, “Hire more staff. Stay like 7-Eleven, open 24 hours.” Staff shortages were mentioned in 25 of 54 focus groups conducted inside facilities, and in five of eight of the outside focus groups. Staff shortages in prisons are not unique to libraries, as noted in this excerpt:

> Learning how to keep their staff. . .I understand it's a security thing, but I've only been here since the 2nd of August in this one this time. I don't really think it's an issue here but in [one facility], the lack of staff thing is a real, real big thing, not only for the inmates, but if you come to work and your other employees don't respect you or you don't want to stay there, you have to do something that you don't want to do, then yeah, you're going to get a different job. But we're the ones who pay for it. I mean that's for libraries, it's for programs. It's just for everything.

Another focus group participant speaking about how they were discouraged from using the library while incarcerated reflected:

> The only time it was hard to use the library was during COVID. No, I take that back. At [one facility] they had very limited library hours due to lack of staff. They had plenty of librarians but they were always pulling them to work as regular guards which caused the library to be closed. Same with teachers and education.

Focus groups from facilities with two or fewer staff FTEs spoke more frequently about open hours as a barrier to library use than those in facilities with three or more library staff. People at facilities with one staff FTE also spoke most frequently about support of the library being a barrier to library use. Conversely, a focus group from a facility with four staff FTEs did not mention open hours as a barrier to library use. This suggests that prisons with adequate staffing are open more hours (though causation cannot be proved from this data). It is also important to note that prison library access can be affected by facility movement schedules and the types of movement at different facilities, for example whether someone is able to choose when they visit the library (open movement) or whether they can only move locations at certain times (closed movement).

Besides the issue of staff shortages, several remarks stand out as examples of how library patrons in prisons regard library staff assistance, and show that more training and other resources may be needed for people working in facility libraries to be effective in their roles:

- I have experienced that as well, kind of a little friction with the staff over here in the library. Just little small stuff, and that kind of deterred me from coming to get photocopies and stuff. The experience that I had was, some people have good social skills and stuff, and that's just something natural, that's something that I guess you acquire over a period of time. And then other people, they look kind of short-tempered or terse or they don't have a social skills and stuff. "When can I get these copies, these photocopies?" "Well, it won't be today. Maybe next week, maybe next Sunday, if we can get around doing it," and stuff like that. So, it kind of deters me, and a lot of us, we don't have people on the street who we can go to . . . so we rely on the library. . . And then you have to sometime negotiate personalities, certain staff are better and that's the one you hope is working this particular day when you come. If not, then you're going to have a hard time. It's a lot of forms you got to fill out too, just to get a photocopy and stuff. It's more paperwork than should be necessary.

- Staff that knows, that doesn't hate their job. They're going there to understand that we need these things. A little bit more compassion would be nice. Don't hate your job. The inmates do most of the work anyways. So, if you're a librarian, just understand that sometimes these are big deals to us. It might not be to you, but they should understand that before they even step foot on that facility.

- Have DOC take libraries more serious in many regards. Pay these librarians more. I was trying to count the other day, I think I've been through 10 librarians since I came here in 2017. . . And one of the reasons is they're the lowest paid jobs at DOC, I

believe . . . We've lost three because they felt being an officer was more fun and officers make twice or three times what they make. And they went out with the wrong attitude and got fired right away.

In some instances, library staff were required to fulfill responsibilities other than the provision of library services and therefore could not be responsive to patrons' information needs, as in this example:

Interviewer: And then, if you could decide, what should be the top priority for improving prison libraries?
Speaker 4: Having more than one staff member.
Speaker 3: That would be mine, too. Having more staff available.
Interviewer: Okay. And how do you think that would help, specifically?
Speaker 3: It would help a lot because I know that with two staff, especially the bathroom incident, if we had someone needed to use [the] bathroom, staff could go out there and escort us to it. Or there's a staff that could help us on the floor would when we have questions about books and stuff, because usually there's one staff and they have to sit in the office to watch everybody. But if they had a second staff that can help us find stuff, that would be awesome.

A PEACEFUL ENVIRONMENT

Though many focus group participants talked about the library as a place of peace, this experience was not universal. Library staff can play a part in helping to create welcoming and safe environments, as described in Section Two. In telling interviewers about some of the ways the library had not served them well, there were nine responses coded for "negative perception." Some of these told of toxic environments, as in this description taken from a long conversation that followed the question, "In what way did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?" The speaker described an "adversarial" relationship between staff and library patrons:

Interviewer: And so that causes folks not to want to come?
Speaker 3: Right. Just for that mindset and just that energy in itself. I get that a lot from guys where it's like, "No, I ain't going to mess with the library, because I don't want to end up with a writeup or getting into an argument with somebody, or with the staff that's going over there."

One participant talked about broader social obstacles to reading, beyond the control of library staff:

> You can't really focus on reading books when there's a possibility of violence, every day. You know what I mean? You exit your cell, there's immediately a possibility of violence. So when you go in your cell, you're not really worried about reading a book. You're worried about the next time you go out. You know what I mean? So it doesn't really have, there's some . . . It's not like that for everyone here. But there's some people, like I said, that are gang affiliated and stuff like that, that the library is the last thing on your mind. You know what I mean?

Several participants complained that their libraries were small, or as noted above, that there was limited capacity. Size, space, and controlling for noise levels can help to make prison libraries safe and welcoming.

LIBRARY PROGRAMS

Other than collections, focus group participants also shared a number of program suggestions or ideas for improving existing programs:

> I think offering a better selection for the Read to the Children [program]. Back in the years that I was here, they were offering book clubs. They were doing movies once a week. There was this thing on tiny houses I came to, it's like a short hour movie thing that they did. I think right now our prison is so down with the lack of anything available. Everybody's in a state of depression and doesn't know how normal operation is. So if the library, being one of the few things that's

open right now, was to offer some type of more activities, that would make a big change in the prison system right now. Whether it's those little things like the book clubs, or maybe little classes to learn . . . I don't know, we may not have a phone, but maybe how to use phones. Some of the people get here and they don't know how to do certain things like that. I know that the library offers little classes in the public. Maybe bring some of that in or these quick little educational biographies or movies that were playing back in time.

"If we had more to do, a lot more people would come to the library," one person said about library services in general. Another focus group suggested having a peer-led debate team, and community-centered programs:

I think they could do, so buy-in is important in prison. Get people to buy in. So, I think if you could get somebody to come and talk about books in society, about their experience of how the library had changed their life or how books had changed their life. Get us in prison in order to interact and see beyond of these perimeters that bond our body in here. And I only say that because prison, a lot of guys, they can't think beyond the circumstance, and they don't really see no benefit of the library because they're like, what is that going to do? But if they actually see and they actually could hear someone else's story from out there in the world, they take time to come in here and talk about these books and the options and stuff like that, as opposed to me and the gentleman just talk about how important books is, they're like, yeah, I heard that. I heard that yesterday, I heard that day before. You know what I'm saying? Kind of wear and tear. So, community events. Community.

The PRISM study also shows the need for programs that help patrons learn about using their libraries, as evidenced by the comments relating to "unfamiliar with systems." This could mean improving communication about what to expect, such as schedules and service standards," or letting patrons know about programs and other opportunities, as the following excerpt describes:

Speaker 3: I don't know how to put it. I'd like the library more, I guess, interactive with people. Like posting new things. Like "Hey, if you check this out you can do this." Just certain things like resume, "If you want to do your resume, sign up for it," or stuff like that.

Speaker 5: Special days in the library.

Speaker 3: Yeah, like special library days for certain things, stuff like that.

Speaker 5: "Build a resume, come in on a certain day."

Speaker 3: Different library programs and stuff you could do throughout, not weekly, like monthly or every other month or something like that. Put it up, "Attention, this is what's happened." Or even like when they have the black history month, put something up about that. "This is how you can research it and learn about it." Stuff like that. Like just the Juneteenth or whatever. Just certain things to be more active with the inmates. I know we're convicts and stuff, but some people do some things that they want to learn. And to not interact with us, some of us take that to offensive like, "Dang, I know I got in trouble, but at least I'm trying to do something differently."

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Services vary from one unit to another, and across facilities, as was especially clear from focus groups with participants who'd returned to their communities. One group talked about making improvements to libraries "across the board":

I think it would be good if the libraries . . . Just, they seem to vary so much as far as population size of who they serve compared to how big the library was, just adequate correspondence between the two. You've got a thousand people, you need a much bigger library at [one facility.]

> That one, that's the big one that I can think of. Where on the other hand, it was just about the same size in [one facility,] and that library was just ginormous. It was this whole bottom of this apartment building. So, you had room to go in there. There was plenty of room for people to walk around and look for things. You're not crawling over people just to get to the meager selection that they've got. So, I guess if it was to be improved, I mean, across the board, it would be something nice to be looked at.

The differences between one facility to another underscore the need for orientation for new library users and for clear communication about library services and programs. Several of the comments that were captured by the code "other" included suggestions for improvement: displays, increased accountability and transparency, engaging signage, and writing materials.

How would focus group participants prioritize potential improvements to library services? Improvements to the collection ranked first in answer to this question, followed by remarks on other barriers to use, including policies and time allowance, as well as information access. Another focus group suggested that administrators conduct an annual survey in order to evaluate and improve library services. Though these conversations reveal lots of ways that library services and collections in prisons might be improved, it is worth noting also that even when asked, "In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished? What obstacles or challenges made it difficult for you to use the library as wished? Is there a negative experience you've had with the library that you're willing to share?" participants sometimes responded only with positive comments and appreciation, as in the following:

> I don't know. I don't really have too many complaints about this library, so. Besides the time thing, but that's it. I mean, I don't see any real difference. They do a pretty good job. Like I said, there's a lot of things to do. There's the music and they have puzzles right there on the table, the books, the TV. It's a place to get away. It's an escape.

For all of the good that libraries inside prisons do, helping patrons access information and connect with other people, or self-regulate, pass time, and escape the realities of their situations, there is also a lot more that these libraries could do to improve their services. The most prevalent suggestions for improving library services in Colorado prisons were materials or programs to let people know what services were available to them, catalog access, improved collections, staffing, and consistency from one facility to another.

Besides speaking candidly about their experiences, focus group participants also expressed gratitude for being able to share their thoughts regarding library services. Some barriers to use are outside the scope of what library staff may be able to control, including security restrictions, policies, and limited resources such as staff time. Other aspects of the user experience could be upgraded or updated to meet the guidelines established in the 2024 ALA S*tandards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained*. One focus group participant was hopeful that their suggestions might make it to the top and be heard, and told interviewers:

> Your word holds more weight than ours would because, excuse me, we can say this, this, this, and this is bad and it should be different, but when they come and they look at it, "Oh, there's books on the shelves, there's this over there. Oh, there's two computers. Oh yeah, they were good." They don't take the time to come in here and see if this is working or if that's working. They'll just look, "Oh, it's good, they got books." And that's it.
>
> With you guys coming in and talking to us, at least you know what we say to you, you guys go back and talk to them and say, "Hey, look, we've seen it for ourselves and then we got detail . . ." Because, every single one of us comes to the library. There's not one person in here that doesn't come. We got a lot of insight. We've been doing it for a while.
>
> With you guys speaking for us, at least we have a voice now, because we could say stuff until we're blue in the face and they don't care. They don't at all. I'm sorry, but they don't.

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APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Custody

- **Custody Level:** Custody levels are not fully defined by CDOC. Close Custody is the strictest, or highest custody level. The leveling moves down in severity in the following order: Close, medium, minimum restrictive, and minimum. Some facilities may include multiple custody levels. For the purpose of our research, if a focus group included people from multiple custody level groups at a given facility, that focus group would be assigned with a "& below" designation. For example a focus group at a medium level custody facility may have also included people in lower custody levels, thus "medium & below" was used to define the group. With each drop in custody level, the amount of security, supervision, controlled movement, and monitored programming changes. Classification depends on many factors "which include; severity of the offenders current and prior convictions, escape history, and history of institutional violence" (AR 600-01, *Offender Classification*.) Note that "below" means fewer restrictions.

- **General Population (GP):** This term is not defined by DOC. If a person is part of GP, they do not reside in a restricted unit, and can move regularly through a facility as determined by facility movement. Every facility has a GP. Incentive units are part of GP.

- **Special Management:** "Alternate housing placement for inmates who are assessed as posing a risk to other offenders, employees, volunteers and the public or those inmates who are assessed at being at risk for serious harm if placed in a general population setting. These units are collectively referred to as special

management." The units include close custody, MCU/MCC, and restrictive housing. (AR 600-09 *Special Management*)

- **Incentive:** a program to reward positive behavior through quality of life privileges and responsibilities. Residents apply for the program and must qualify through good behavior. (*AR 650-01 Incentive Living Program*)

- **Inclusive Therapeutic Community (ITC):** intended to treat people with addictions. Could be general population but have special programming.

- **Management Control Unit (MCU):** "A close custody designation that provides an increased level of housing, supervision and control to maintain the safety of the public, employees, volunteers and offenders. Assignment to MCU is primarily used as a progressive management assignment for offenders who are progressing from either a Close Custody MCU/High Risk or directly from Close Custody MCU/Comprehensive (MCC)." (AR 600-09 *Special Management*)

- **Medications for Addiction Treatment Program (MAT):** A program for residents with substance abuse history in which DOC clinicians provide medications under supervision to aid in the physical symptoms of substance withdrawal. Most facilities have this program. Treatment that includes a pharmacologic intervention (medication) as part of the treatment plan. This could include, methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone alone or in combination with behavioral health treatment. (AR700-40 *Medications for Addiction Treatment Program*)

- **Offender Care Assistant (OCA):** "An offender assigned to provide assistance with various activities of daily living in accordance with an offender's verified limitations. These offenders are screened, trained, and assigned to provide familial, non-medical duties commensurate with their level of training." These inmates provide aid to other inmates who need assistance and care, such as inmates with dementia or those who use a wheelchair. (AR 700-02 *Medical Scope of Service*)

- **Protective Custody (PC):** alternate housing placement for inmates at substantial risk of serious harm if placed in a general population setting. It is not a punitive measure. All custody levels can have PC. (AR 650-02 *Protective Custody*)

- **Residential Treatment Program (RTP):** A specialized program for inmates with mental health disorders, intellectual and developmental treatment needs, and/ or significant functional impairment. Includes an incentive level system and treatment to meet behavioral goals. (AR 650-04 *Offender Group Living: Residential Treatment Program for Offenders with Mental Health Disorders and Intellectual and Developmental Needs*)

- **Restrictive Housing:** Separate housing for inmates who are removed from population, serving disciplinary sanctions, pending reclassification, pending transfer, or pending protective custody review. Generally temporary, single-cell housing with limited property and activities (AR 650-03 *Restrictive Housing*). Every facility has restrictive housing beds, (AR 600-01 "a placement that requires an offender to be confined to a cell for at least 22

hours per day"). This includes the Transport Unit.

Other Definitions

- **Chow:** A dining area or mealtime.
- **CO:** Correctional Officer.
- **DOC:** Any Department of Correction.
- **The Hole:** Administrative segregation, also known as solitary confinement which is highly restrictive and provides no opportunity to interact with others.
- **ILD:** Institutional Library Development, an office of CSL.
- **ILL:** Interlibrary Loan.
- **Inside:** Refers to being inside of, or incarcerated in prison.
- **Kite:** Kite is both a verb and a noun and is essentially interfacility mail from residents to staff either at their own facility or another. Kites can be requests for a variety of services including library services such as information requests, or book holds.
- **Lockup/lockdown:** When, for a variety of reasons, people are contained to their cell or pod for a length of time that is longer than ordinary.
- **Movement:** A set period of time in which people are permitted to move from one area of a prison to another.
- **Outside:** Refers to being outside of, or released from prison.
- **Parent/Child Code:** A parent code is qualitative analysis code that is hierarchically higher than a child code. A parent code houses child codes which are related.
- **Pod:** Living area that typically includes a group of cells. Can also be used in reference to a group of people, e.g., "My pod" can also mean, "the people in my housing unit."
- **Prosocial Behavior:** When a person expresses or does something that indicates an awareness of how they interact with and affect others.
- **Rec:** Physical recreation time or the area for physical activity.
- **Removed from Population:** removed from a specific prison population for a variety of reasons including being under investigation.
- **The Streets:** The world outside of prison.
- **Yard:** Outdoor area at a facility.

Codebook

GENERAL CODEBOOK RULES FOR APPLICATION AND USE

- Take things at face value; do not infer too much.
- Trust your intuition but take your time in doing so.
- Application is highly subjective. Meet with your team to compare coding and review your best practices.
- When reviewing code application, keep all codes previously applied unless there is strong disagreement about it. New codes may be added in addition to existing codes upon group agreement.
- The nature of the codebook and grounded theory mean that your understanding and the terms you use will evolve from the beginning to the end of your project. This process can provide you with insights about the relationships between the codes and your research questions.

CODES AND DEFINITIONS

- **Accessibility:** The ability to physically access the library and its resources. A person may have or not have access to the library and/or its resources due to barriers listed below, or may enjoy the access that they do have. Can also be applied for instances of physical or cognitive impairment.

- **Technology:** The use or lack thereof of electronic devices in the library. Can also be used for the ability/inability to borrow electronic devices from the library.

- **Atmosphere**: Change in atmosphere due to the library; this term originates from the paper, *'It's in the air here': Atmospheres of incarceration*, which describes "how various components – including aesthetics, olfaction, temperature, and the performances that arise from them – comprise sensory atmospheric effects in prison. In doing so, we find atmosphere(s) emerge – not simply from the materiality of the prison itself, but from cultural constructions of carceral and non-carceral landscapes and in conjunction with personal practice and preference." Atmosphere is shared and has a people connection to it.

- **Barriers to use**: Things that make it difficult to use the library

    - **Open hours**: The hours that the library is open.

    - **Borrowing time limit**: How long users can have an item checked out.

    - **Capacity**: How many people can be in the library at a given time.

    - **Censorship**: Restrictions on what the library is allowed to distribute and therefore what people can read or what is available to them.

    - **Don't have what I want**: Collection is missing something that a person wants

    - **Financial**: Fees or fines are keeping someone from using the library (either previous experiences with fines make them not want to use it, or they currently are not allowed to use it.)

    - **Language**: When a person speaks a language that is not used in the library so they cannot communicate. Can also include instances of illiteracy.

    - **Borrowing quantity limit**: A limit on the number of items a person can have checked out.

    - **Policies**: Any prison policy in the library or otherwise that impedes a person's ability to use the library.

    - **Security restriction**: Level of custody determining use of the library (some levels are book cart only for example)

    - **Social**: When a set of social norms makes it difficult or impossible to use the library (for example: a certain group of people always get to go to the library because they are pushier than others. Another example: if the clerks do not make the library welcoming to some people.)

    - **Support of library**: Support (or lack thereof) from prison administration or correctional officers for use of the library or resources for the library.

    - **Time allowance**: The amount of time a person is allowed to spend inside the library.

    - **Unfamiliar with systems**: When a person is not sure how any particular system in the library works so it makes

library use challenging (e.g.,, how to use the OPAC).

    - **Work schedule**: When a person's work schedule conflicts with the time allotted for library use.

- **Behavior modification**: A person modifying their behavior because of the library, as in someone who chooses not to act in a way that would jeopardize having access to the library.

- **COVID**: Anything involving the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic including services/lack thereof, changes in library, staffing.

- **Escapism**: Use of the library or its materials in order to dissociate from a person's current situation.

    - **Imagination**: When an item from the collection sparks someone's imagination.

- **Internet search abilities**: The desire or ability to search the internet to answer questions, often hindered by a facility's policies.

- **Learn or practice new skill**: The library enables someone to learn or practice something new.

- **Library discovery**: In answer to the question "How did you find the library?"

    - **Find on own**

    - **Suggested by someone**: Could be someone inside/outside the prison.

- **Library Programs**: Extracurricular activities hosted by the library

    - **Language classes**

    - **Classes: GED and College**

    - **Game night**

    - **Group activities**

    - **Book club**

    - **Movie night**

    - **Origami**

    - **Read to the Children**: A program where a resident can be recorded reading a book to their child, then the video is sent to the child along with a book.

- **Library as a place of peace:** Used to describe the atmosphere within the library as peaceful, relaxing and/or quiet.

- **Library as an activity**: Visit the library as simply something to do, not for any other purpose.

- **Library Services**: Things the library does to help its patrons.

    - **Legal help**

    - **Book cart/delivery**

    - **Collection**: Quality and accessibility of any component of the collection including books, music, movies, and technology. This could be in a positive or in a negative sense, as in "the library doesn't have the music I want," or "the library has the music I like to listen to." This is distinct from services or the space. A collection could be browsable. When a person says ILL that does not necessitate using the code collection though sometimes ILL use could reflect on a library's collection, as ILL might be used if the library does not have what a patron wants.

    - **Copying machine**: Copies of anything being printed in the library.

- **Current events**: Keeping up with what's going on outside of prison (could be using newspapers or magazines, for instance).
- **Databases**: Online databases excluding the catalog.
- **Forms**: help printing, filling out and filing.
- **Games**: Puzzles or other games that are played in the library.
- **Information access**: When a person wants a question answered, needs more information on a certain topic or organically discovers something new. Also can be used for instances of information encountering (seemingly serendipitous moments of information discovery).
- **Interlibrary loan**: ability to borrow books from other libraries/library systems.
- **Language learning**: learn a new language from a resource in the library.
- **Laptops/tablets**
- **Audiobooks**
- **Magazines**
- **Movies**
- **Music**
- **Newspapers**
- **Online catalog**
- **Print catalog**
- **Re-entry information**
- **Soft seat**: A soft chair/couch to sit on.
- **Veterans assistance**
- **Video games**
- **eBooks**

- **Mental health**: Anything relating to a person's mental state, including mood.
- **Open hours**: The library's open hours when they are NOT a barrier.
- **Other**: Catchall for significant excerpts to revisit.
- **Pass time**: When a person uses the library or its materials just to pass time. Differs from "Library as an activity" in that passing time often happens outside of the library with materials borrowed from it.
- **Perceptions of the library**: When a person clearly notes a negative/neutral/positive feeling towards the library
  - **Negative feelings**
  - **Neutral:** For when participants were vocally apathetic (for example "The library is just okay").
  - **Positive feelings**
- **Pro-social behaviors**: When a person expresses or does something that indicates an awareness of how they interact with and affect others.
  - **Helping others**: Assisting other people.
  - **Connect with others**: Both people on the inside and outside.

- **Democracy**: Providing input about library/other activities. Having a say in what happens.
- **Donate time/resources**
- **Empathy**: Expressing understanding or awareness of how someone else is feeling.
- **Expressing appreciation**: Expressions of gratitude, thankfulness.
- **Agreement:** When participants clearly agree with each other on a given topic.
- **Leadership**: When a person self-identifies as a leader or clearly propels a group of people in a certain direction.
- **Respect for others/property**: Examples of showing respect for other people and/or property.
- **Role modeling**: When a person notes a time when they or someone else modeled a behavior for others to follow.
- **Social norms/normalization**: Examples of setting or following a set of social rules in a group.
- **Turn taking-focus group**: Moments when people take turns during our focus groups.
- **Work with others**: coming together to complete a common goal.

- **Quotes**: meaningful/useful quotes for our report.
- **Reading for enjoyment**: Leisure reading.
- **Religion/spirituality**: Use of the library for spiritual/religious purposes.
- **Self-led learning**: Including educating self and discovering something new about oneself.
- **Staff**: Prison library staff assisting or interacting with patrons. Can also be used when a person is describing library staff person's behaviors outside of patron interactions. Note that this does not include library staff who are incarcerated.
  - **Shortages**: Times when lack of staff impacted library services.
  - **Staff assistance**: Examples of library staff assisting patrons.
- **Questions 1-7:** All questions and sub-questions asked in focus group.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP MATERIALS

Interview Schedule (Inside Groups)

[Introductory Script to be delivered along with the reading/distribution of the focus group permission documents.]

Hi Everyone,

My name is ___ and this is _____ and _____. We are from the Colorado State Library's Library Research Service. Thank you for participating in this focus group. You can expect that this will take a little less than an hour. We will be recorded on this device. We will also be taking notes as backup for the recording. We're asking that you be as honest as you can- your answers will be anonymous and the people on this team are the only ones who will see your name

tied to what you say. The things you say will not affect your sentencing in any way. We also want to recognize that the language we use could feel offensive to some people. We have tried to use language that is as inclusive and people-first as possible. If any terms we use feel offensive or uncomfortable to you, please let us know so that we can learn and correct ourselves. For example, the term "incarcerated people" may not be what you'd like us to say, so just let us know. We are also asking that everyone be respectful of each other- not everyone will share the same opinions and that's ok! Please give everyone time to finish what they're saying- we value what everyone has to share whether it's positive or negative. We are not tied to your library, so you won't hurt our feelings by saying anything negative. You are also able to stop participating in this group at any time. Please just let us know and we will find an alternative option for you while we finish our session. Does anyone have any questions before we get started?

Focus group interview questions and prompts:

1. Why do you use your prison library?

   Prompts:
   a. For example, do you use the library for personal reasons? To participate in specific program activities?
   b. Did someone else—for example another incarcerated person, a staff member, or a family member—encourage you to use the library or did you find it on your own?

2. In what ways does your prison library serve you well?

   Prompts:
   a. What kept you returning to the library?
   b. Materials? Programs? Services? Contact with others? A specific kind of activity or information?
   c. What made you feel well-served by your library?
   d. What's your favorite or most memorable experience you've had in the library?

3. In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?

   Prompts:
   a. What obstacles or challenges made it difficult for you to use the library as wished?
   b. How did those obstacles or challenges limit your library use?
   c. How did you cope with those limits?
   d. Is there a negative experience you've had with the library that you're willing to share?

4. In what ways, if any, has your prison library experience changed how you feel about yourself and/or others?

   Prompts:
   a. What book/magazine/other resource have you interacted with that's changed your mind about something?
   b. Have you ever connected with someone because of the library or because of something you've learned in the library?
   c. Has the opportunity to visit the library changed the way you behave in prison?

5. What could prison libraries do more of, do differently, or do better to serve people while they are incarcerated?

Prompts:

a. What do you wish it could have done, but did not?
b. What do you wish it had been able to do better?
c. What do you wish you were able to experience more often?

6. What should be the top priority for improving prison libraries?

   Prompts:

   a. What is one thing that would improve how prison libraries serve their users?

7. Overall, how do you feel about your prison library?

   Prompts:

   a. Are there any other stories about your experiences with your prison library that you'd like to share?

Interview Schedule (Outside Groups)

[Introductory Script to be delivered along with the reading/distribution of the focus group permission documents.]

Hi Everyone,

My name is ___ and this is _____ and _____. We are from Remerg, an organization that offers re-entry services to formerly incarcerated people. Thank you for participating in this focus group. You can expect that this will take a little less than an hour. We will be recording this meeting. We will also be taking notes as back up for the recording. We're asking that you be as honest as you can- your answers will be anonymous and the people on this team are the only ones who will see your name tied to what you say. The things you say will not affect your parole in any way. We also want to recognize that the language we use could feel offensive to some people. We have tried to use language that is as inclusive and people-first as possible. If any terms we use feel offensive or uncomfortable to you, please let us know so that we can learn and correct ourselves. For example, the term "incarcerated people" may not be what you'd like us to say, so just let us know. We are also asking that everyone be respectful of each other- not everyone will share the same opinions and that's ok! Please give everyone time to finish what they're saying- we value what everyone has to share whether it's positive or negative. You are also able to stop participating in this group at any time. Please just let us know and we will find an alternative option for you while we finish our session. Does anyone have any questions before we get started?

Focus group interview questions and prompts:

1. Why did you use your prison library?

   Prompts:

   a. For example, did you use the library for personal reasons? To participate in specific program activities?
   b. Did someone else—for example another incarcerated person, a staff member, or a family member—encourage you to use the library or did you find it on your own?

2. In what ways did your prison library serve you well?

Prompts:

a. What kept you returning to the library?
b. Materials? Programs? Services? Contact with others? A specific kind of activity or information?
c. What made you feel well-served by your library?
d. What's your favorite or most memorable experience you had in the library?

3. In what ways did your prison library not serve you as well as you wished?

   Prompts:

   a. What obstacles or challenges made it difficult for you to use the library as wished?
   b. How did those obstacles or challenges limit your library use?
   c. How did you cope with those limits?
   d. Is there a negative experience you've had with the library that you're willing to share?

4. In what ways, if any, has your prison library experience changed how you feel about yourself and/or others?

   Prompts:

   a. What book/magazine/other resource have you interacted with that's changed your mind about something?
   b. Have you ever connected with someone because of the library or because of something you've learned in the library?
   c. Has the opportunity to visit the library changed the way you behave in prison?

5. What could prison libraries do more of, do differently, or do better to serve people while they are incarcerated?

   Prompts:

   a. What do you wish it could have done, but did not?
   b. What do you wish it had been able to do better?
   c. What do you wish you were able to experience more often?

6. What should be top priority for improving prison libraries?

   Prompts:

   a. What is one thing that would improve how prison libraries serve their users?

7. Overall, how do you feel about your prison library?

   Prompts:

   a. Are there any other stories about your experiences with your prison library that you'd like to share?

Consent to Participate in a Research Study (Inside)

Title: PRISM Project: are prison libraries Motivators of pro-social behavior and successful re-entry?

This study will work to understand the outcomes of prison library services, speaking with people who are currently incarcerated and those who were formerly incarcerated to learn about their use of the library. This study will also

look at how library use might have impacted residents while they were in prison and their re-entry after release. This study will examine the outcomes of library services in prisons.

Researchers:

Primary Investigator: Charissa Brammer, Colorado State Library, brammer_c@cde.state.co.us 201 E. Colfax Ave, Room 309, Denver CO 80203

Members of the Institutional Library Development and Library Research Service offices at the Colorado State Library, and Remerg.

What is this study about and why are you doing it?

The PRISM project is assessing prison library services and the impact that libraries have on the lives of people who are incarcerated, both during their period of incarceration and after they are released. Researchers will be holding focus groups with dozens of current and former residents of Colorado State funded prisons to learn about their library experiences and will distribute surveys to patrons of prison libraries to learn about their experiences. We are centering the voice of people who are and have been incarcerated and are or were library users while incarcerated.

What are you asking me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If you agree to be in the study as a focus group participant, you will meet with a small group of fellow incarcerated people and researchers to answer some questions about your experience with prison libraries. This meeting will be recorded. The focus groups will take approximately 1 hour, there will be two to three researchers in each focus group, one asking questions and at least one taking notes on responses and managing the recording.

How will this study help me?

There will be no direct benefit to you from this study, but food will be provided to you during the focus group interviews. You will also get to play a part in improving prison library services in your facility and across Colorado.

Why should I be in the study?

The results from this study will help us better understand the ways that libraries are used in prison facilities, both where they are succeeding and where they can be improved. This study will also provide data to people working in prison libraries across the country, to better understand the benefits of prison libraries. It is important that we speak with as many people as possible to represent the many backgrounds and points of view that exist.

Are there any risks to participation in this study and how will you mitigate those risks?

There are not any risks to participation in this study that we are aware of. There is a chance that some of the questions might cause discomfort, and you are welcome not to answer those questions or to leave the focus group at any time, for any reason.

We will protect your personally identifiable information, but there is a risk that it could be accidentally revealed – we have detailed protections in place to ensure that your personal information will only be seen by members of the research team who work at the Colorado State Library and one transcription service who is bound by a privacy policy.

What else do I need to know?

Your decision on whether to be in this study is voluntary.

You may refuse to be in this study at any time and you will not face any negative consequences for refusing to be in this study at any time.

Your decision to participate or not participate will not impact your conditions of incarceration and will not impact your release date or parole eligibility.

Who can I contact with questions or concerns?

You may contact the researcher, Charissa Brammer at 720-648-2948, brammer_c@cde.state.co.us, 201 E. Colfax Ave, Room 309, Denver CO 80203 with any questions that you might have about this study.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the above information (or it has been read to me). The study has been explained to me. My questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Signature:

Written Name:

Date:

If assisted with the form, the information for the person assisting:

Signature:

Written name:

Date:

Consent to Participate in a Research Study (Outside)

Title: PRISM Project: are prison libraries Motivators of pro-social behavior and successful re-entry?

This study will work to understand the outcomes of prison library services, speaking with people who are currently incarcerated and those who were formerly incarcerated to learn about their use of the library. This study will also look at how library use might have impacted residents while they were in prison and their re-entry after release. This study will examine the outcomes of library services in prisons.

Researchers:

Primary Investigator: Charissa Brammer, Colorado State Library, brammer_c@cde.state.co.us , 201 E. Colfax Ave, Room 309, Denver CO 80203

Members of the Institutional Library Development and Library Research Service offices at the Colorado State Library as well as Carol Peeples from Remerg.

What is this study about and why are you doing it?

The PRISM project is assessing prison library services and the impact that libraries have on the lives of people who are or were incarcerated, both during their period of incarceration and after they are released. Researchers will be holding focus groups with dozens of current and former residents of Colorado State funded prisons to learn about their library experiences and will distribute surveys to patrons of prison libraries to learn about their experiences. We are centering the voice of people who are and have been incarcerated and are or were library users while incarcerated.

What are you asking me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If you agree to be in the study as a focus group participant, you will meet with a small group of fellow formerly incarcerated people and researchers to answer some questions about your experience with prison libraries. This meeting will be recorded. The focus groups will take approximately 1 hour, there will be two to three researchers in each focus group, one asking questions and at least one taking notes on responses and managing the recording.

How will this study help me?

There will be no direct benefit to you from this study, but you will receive a thank you gift after the session is complete. You will also get to play a part in improving prison library services in facilities across Colorado.

Why should I be in the study?

The results from this study will help us better understand the ways that libraries are used in prison facilities, both where they are succeeding and where they can be improved. This study will also provide data to people working in prison libraries across the country, to better understand the benefits of prison libraries. It is important that we speak with as many people as possible to represent the many backgrounds and points of view that exist.

Are there any risks to participation in this study and how will you mitigate those risks?

There are not any risks to participation in this study that we are aware of. There is a chance that some of the questions might cause discomfort, and you are welcome not to answer those questions or to leave the focus group at any time, for any reason.

We will protect your personally identifiable information, but there is a risk that it could be accidentally revealed – we have detailed protections in place to ensure that your personal information will only be seen by members of the research team who work at the Colorado State Library, Remerg and one transcription service who is bound by a privacy policy. We are also using Alchemer as a data collection software for surveys, and Zoom for virtual focus groups. As with any software, there is a possibility that your information could be accidentally revealed.

What else do I need to know?

Your decision on whether to be in this study is voluntary.

You will face no negative consequences for deciding not to be in this study at any time and your participation will not impact your conditions of parole.

Who can I contact with questions or concerns?

You may contact the researcher, Charissa Brammer, 720-648-2948 or brammer_c@cde.state.co.us with any questions that you might have about this study.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the above information (or it has been read to me). The study has been explained to me. My questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

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Date: