

Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People

The technologies utilized by, or absent within, juvenile detentions, jails, prisons, and other carceral sites have major implications for how librarians and information workers facilitate incarcerated people's access to information and digital literacy res

free on the tablets, but the software is often outdated, thus making meaningful access to the law library nearly impossible (Finkel and Bertram, 2019).

Kaun and Stiernstedt issue a review of how prisons and similar locations are hotbeds of technological development, with incarcerated people as forced participants in the refinement of a variety of technologies (2022).² After presenting an example in which the implementation of an AI analysis for incidents within a prison led administrators to reduce information access (by removing televisions), the authors remind readers that “technologies that are tested in prisons are irrevocably entangled with vulnerabilities produced in and by incarceration” (2022, p. 81).³

A range of technologies currently are being developed in or for future use in prisons, and these are often designed to further regulate people’s ability to move through prison locations, including, we can assume, ability to access the prison library (when one exists). Some international examples of in-development and proposed technologies include: automated facial recognition and tracking as a solution to limited staffing (Diyasa, Fauzi, Idhom, & Setiawan, 2021)⁴, extensive surveillance and record maintenance as a method of contact tracing in a youth facility in Chicago (Unruh, Dharmapuri, & Soyemi, 2021), and data mining incarcerated people to inform prison management (Yang, 2021). There are proposals for fully automated or “smart” prisons, helmed or assisted by Artificial Intelligence, as well as debates about the potential bias this introduces or reiterates (Iverson, 2022; McKay, 2022). Some researchers go so far as to propose technologies

together, recent publications reveal the capacity for technology to collect information about incarcerated people, a tension that librarians will have to contend with as they attempt to make information available through technology while also protecting patron privacy.

They also reveal that most technologies inside of carceral facilities are not intended for use by incarcerated people. This lack of access has serious implications for the development of digital literacy skills. The impact of incarceration on digital literacy is heavily racialized and furthers the systemic oppression of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. According to a recent report from The Sentencing Project:

1. Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly 5 times the rate of white Americans.
2. Nationally, one in 81 Black adults in the U.S. is serving time in state prison. Wisconsin leads the nation in Black imprisonment rates; one of every 36 Black Wisconsinites is in prison.
3. In 12 states, more than half the prison population is Black: Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.
4. Seven states maintain a Black/white disparity larger than 9 to 1: California, Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Wisconsin.
5. Latinx individuals are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 1.3 times the incarceration rate of whites. Ethnic disparities are highest in Massachusetts, which reports an ethnic differential of 4.1:1.

that “[t]o date, 45 state correctional systems and the entire federal prison system has switched over to electronic law libraries” (2020, p. 104). Brown, advocating that both print and digital legal collections be available for incarcerated people’s use, argues that digital-only access restricts access due to limited computers or devices and does not consider varying digital literacy levels. Additional concerns about digital-only legal collections include that they may not always be up-to-date, they have issues with ADA access, and they have potential to be used for institutional surveillance. While legal communications, including legal mail, are considered protected and fall under specific practices and policies, the frequent use of LexisNexis as meaningful access to the law potentially places incarcerated people’s legal research under scrutiny.⁸

Incarceration creates new health concerns and amplifies pre-existing conditions which are often already exacerbated by systemic oppression. Research on telehealth programs in prisons has identified “mixed evidence on the impact of, and outcomes from, telehealth in prisons,” even though the use of “telehealth within correctional institutions is well-documented, particularly in the U.S.” (Tian, Venugopalan, Kumar, & Beard, 2021). This has repercussions for the health, and health literacy, of people who have experienced incarceration.

Literature on health and technology reviewed in this period was concerned with the development of technical tools and applications that can be used to

Strengthening digital infrastructure is one step in ensuring that televisit services that can connect incarcerated youth to their families and support youth's mental health are made widely available (Toliu-Shams, Bath, McPhee, Folk, Porche, & Fortuna, 2022). This infrastructure is also critical in maintaining family connections.

Family connection can facilitate literacy development for children and create a sense of presence even when a parent is incarcerated. Incarcerated fathers who participated in a reading program wherein they were filmed reading a book aloud and then able to send the recording and a copy of the book to their child/children described this as materially communicating to their children that they wanted to be present (Stickel, Prins, & Kaiper-Marquez, 2021). One participant shared that the distance to the prison made many in-person visits impossible, and the video was a way of still maintaining contact. He described the possibilities for connection that the video created as

by them being able to see me on the screen ... and for it to be recorded to where if, they just miss my voice or just miss seeing me, they'll always be able to just pop that video in. (2021, 183).

New York Public Library's Daddy & Me program is among many of the exemplary programs noted for facilitating a lasting connection between children and incarcerated parents and building children's literacy (Stickel, Prins, & Kaiper-Marquez, 2021). Brooklyn Public Library and Queens Public Library also offer video visitation through their libraries (Anderson, Ness, & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2022).

Brooklyn and Queens Public Libraries built from their work providing programs to patrons incarcerated at

Library Hub may not be confidential. “In order to mitigate the privacy issues, library staff decided to head the Ask a Librarian! section and the Mail-a-Book/BookMatch section with a boldface notice that any correspondence via tablet was subject to surveillance and also offered patrons the option to mail the libraries their requests” (Anderson, Ness, & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2022, p. 51). Even with this warning, library patrons were more likely to request mental health and LGBTQIA+ information through the tablets than during in-person library service.

Queens Public Library also provided needed technology and digital literacy support to people released from Rikers. Through their grant-supported Immediate Access program, Queens Public Library was able to provide free cell phones, data plans, technology support, and more to patrons released in the period of the pandemic during which libraries were closed and their many resources were unavailable to patrons (Anderson, Ness, & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2022). Digital access and digital literacy will also impact how academic librarians who seek to support currently and formerly incarcerated students provide services and facilitate access to information (Bushman & Monobe, 2021).

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Virtual programming offers an opportunity for library systems to provide more equitable library services to incarcerated patrons, at minimal increased cost for the library. For instance, the St. Louis County Public Library also provides over 1,000 virtual, asynchronous library programs to people incarcerated in the Missouri Department of Corrections, which facility staff downloaded frary.131c

(Willig, in Snow, 2020, p. 58)

Although technology inside of carceral facilities is often designed to be restrictive or to increase surveillance, the handful of example programs and services offered by libraries attests to the possibility that libraries can, and do, provide technology-based services to people who are incarcerated. From extending existing services and programs to creating focused services, libraries across the country are providing models for supporting incarcerated youth and adults.⁹

Reviewing the literature published between 2020 and 2022 also provides insight into the ways academic, public, and special libraries can provide more focused digital literacy support to patrons who may not have had any access to technology equivalent to the computers, databases, phones, and other devices that are available outside of prisons. Here, there is an opportunity for libraries to incorporate knowledge about how incarceration can limit the possibility of developing digital literacy skills into their existing approaches to digital literacy, or create more focused programming specifically for people who have been incarcerated.

Due to the scale of incarceration, the technology and digital literacy programs that libraries develop and provide will still likely fall behind the number of people who are negatively impacted by incarceration and their families and communities. Working together to share examples of what works well and models for innovative programming will allow libraries to advocate for currently and formerly incarcerated people. As librarians and information workers continue this work, they can do so in recognition that, as long as people are incarcerated, there is a need to create more equitable access to technologies, including common information and communication technologies, inside of carceral facilities.

⁹San Francisco Public Library's work to ensure that incarcerated people in the San Francisco jails have free access to e-books, media, and music is a recent example of how libraries may provide technologically-mediated services (Financial Justice Project, 2023).

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