

Prison libraries and their future potential in England and Wales

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Introduction

The prison environment is complex and governors often, understandably, prioritise safety and security.² Yet, this can be at the expense of promoting positive activities that can support rehabilitation.³ There is a lack of empirical evidence around prison libraries and research is often isolated to the field of librarianship, which does not appreciate the intersecting disciplines involved in library practice.^{4,5} However, there is a range of literature and public discourse emerging that considers the broad reaching benefits and potential of prison libraries.^{6,7,8,9,10} This article aims to add to the empirical evidence of prison library research. Firstly, the article will discuss the purpose of prison libraries and current practice in England and Wales. It will then explore the trends in access to prison libraries and their resource materials using survey data collected by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) from adults in prison over the last 20 years. This will support prison leaders on how to optimise prison libraries for people in prison, prison establishments and wider society, and to guide further research.

Purpose of prison libraries

Libraries are a unique space within prisons, offering a calming community hub.¹¹ They can facilitate informal education that is more welcoming than formal classrooms in which people in

¹ This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of HM Chief Inspector of Prisons.

² Harrison, K., Mason, R., Nichols, H., & Smith, L. (2024). *Work, Culture, and Wellbeing Among Prison Governors in England and Wales*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham.

³ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual Report 2022-23* (HC 1451). HM Inspectorate of Prisons. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-chief-inspector-of-prisons-annual-report-2022-to-2023>

⁴ Sulé, A., & Ardanuy, J. (2023). Evolution of research on prison library: A bibliometric study. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 7607, 1-18.

⁵ Garner, J. (2022). Fifty Years of Prison Library Scholarly Publishing: A Literature Analysis. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 92(3), 241-258.

⁶ National Literacy Trust. (2022, October 3). Libraries Week 3 -9 October 2022: Libraries as the beating heart of prison life. *National Literacy Trust*. <https://literacytrust.org.uk/news/libraries-week-2022-libraries-heart-prison-life/>

⁷ Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2018). What is the Role of the Prison Library? The Development of a Theoretical Foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120-139.

⁸ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

⁹ Prison Reform Trust. (2017, January 12). Access to the library. *Prison Reform Trust*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/access-to-the-library/>

¹⁰ Mishra, S., Chaudhuri, M., Dey, A. K., Tiwari, R., & Singh, R. (2022). Prison libraries serving the 'whole person': A qualitative study. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 54(2), 284-293.

¹¹ National Literacy Trust. (2022, October 3). Libraries Week 3 -9 October 2022: Libraries as the beating heart of prison life. *National Literacy Trust*. <https://literacytrust.org.uk/news/libraries-week-2022-libraries-heart-prison-life/>

prison have often had negative experiences.¹² This can include supporting wellbeing, developing agency and building social capital, in addition to facilitating academic qualifications. Healthcare professionals in the community recognise the health and wellbeing benefits of community spaces, such as libraries, and use ‘social prescribing’ to direct patients to these activities. There is work currently underway by the Clinks charity to incorporate this practice into prisons and the wider criminal justice system.¹³

Research conducted with prison library staff across the UK (which have similar operating models across each jurisdiction) highlighted their top objectives were ‘meeting information needs’ and ‘supporting educational needs’.¹⁴ This includes enabling people in prison to work on their legal cases, review prison rules, improve literacy and complete education courses.¹⁵ Further objectives reported by prison library staff in the same study were ‘enabling reading for pleasure’ and ‘providing a safe, neutral environment’.¹⁶ They viewed prison libraries as a space that supports desistance by empowering people in prison.

The same study highlighted differing opinions from senior management on the purpose of prison libraries.¹⁷ Some staff reported Governors or Directors positively engaging with the library and viewing the smooth running of the library as indicative of the whole prison. But some staff reported their frustration that senior management viewed the library as just a “*trolley of books*”. This negative perception then impacted prioritisation of time and investment in the library. The purpose described by library staff overlaps with other departments with whom they work closely, such as education and resettlement. But investment in these other departments is often at the expense of libraries rather than a collaborative approach.¹⁸ This is likely due to having clearer quantifiable targets, such as graded courses and employment levels, that senior managers can quickly assess within the confines of HMPPS practice and budgets.¹⁹ Yet investment should focus on prison library outcomes in tandem with other prison services to fully support their users.

Like their community counterparts, prison library users view libraries as a space that provides holistic support and hope for the future.²⁰ For people in prison they can facilitate development of pro-social identities, behaviours and attitudes.²¹ This can then support desistance journeys and

¹² Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2018). What is the Role of the Prison Library? The Development of a Theoretical Foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120-139.

¹³ Dehnavi, O. (2023, June 27). Social prescribing in the criminal justice system – building the evidence base. *Clinks*. <https://www.clinks.org/community/blog-posts/social-prescribing-criminal-justice-system-building-evidence-base>

¹⁴ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

¹⁵ Prison Reform Trust. (2017, January 12). Access to the library. *Prison Reform Trust*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/access-to-the-library/>

¹⁶ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

¹⁷ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

¹⁸ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

¹⁹ Prison Reform Trust. (2024). *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: February 2024*. Prison Reform Trust. Retrieved from <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Winter-2024-factfile.pdf>

²⁰ Mishra, S., Chaudhuri, M., Dey, A. K., Tiwari, R., & Singh, R. (2022). Prison libraries serving the ‘whole person’: A qualitative study. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 54(2), 284-293.

²¹ Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2018). What is the Role of the Prison Library? The Development of a Theoretical Foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120-139.

better engagement across prison life and on release. For example, InsideTime shared a story from a prison library orderly who now enjoyed books in a new way and felt “*enthusiastic*” about their future employability.²² There are additional challenges for prison libraries compared to public libraries, such as security and access to technology (discussed in the current practice section below).²³ But the overarching purpose is the same. Libraries are a community hub that provide a range of resources that support education, wellbeing and personal development.²⁴

Legal provision and expectations of prison libraries in England and Wales

There have been significant developments in practice and funding, but the legal foundation for adult prison libraries in England and Wales remains under the Prison Rules 1999/728, Section 33.²⁵ It places a legal requirement for adult prisons to have a library and provide access to the library, in line with the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964. The ‘Prison Education and Library Services for adult prisons in England Policy Framework’ stipulates the prison library should provide accessible support for learning, literacy and resettlement. It should also “*promote reading as a source of pleasure and provide prisoners with opportunities for wider cultural engagement*”.²⁶ Further operational guidance is provided under the prison service instruction (PSI) ‘02/2015 Prison service library’.²⁷ This includes that people should have weekly access to the library for a minimum of thirty minutes. However, the education elements of this PSI were replaced by the policy framework which can be interpreted as removing the minimum access requirements.²⁸

Alongside operational guidance, HMIP sets out expectations for prisons. HMIP is an independent body that inspects prisons, immigration removal centres and youth detention across England and Wales. Their expectations vary marginally for different types of custody but broadly fit into the same four healthy prison tests: safety, respect, purposeful activity and preparation for release. Under purposeful activity there is an expectation that “*Prisoners benefit from regular access to a suitable library, library materials and additional learning resources that meet their needs*”.²⁹ The published guidance further details indicators on how prison libraries can meet this expectation. This retains the expectation that adults have access to the prison library or library services at least once a week and that available materials are relevant to their needs.

²² Billington, R. (2023, November 1). Life on the shelf: Prison libraries are great – if they’re open. *InsideTime*. Retrieved from <https://insidetime.org/comment/life-on-the-shelf-prison-libraries-are-great-if-theyre-open/>

²³ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

²⁴ Gordon, J., Blackett, A., Fordham, R., Garraffa, M., Howard Wilsher, S., Leist, E., Ponzo, A., Smith, D., Welsh, A. and Xydopoulos, G. (2023). *Libraries for living, and for living better: The value and impact of public libraries in the East of England*. UEA Publishing Project. Retrieved from <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-living-and-living-better>

²⁵ Bowe, C. (2011). Recent Trends in UK Prison Libraries. *Library Trends*, 59(3), 427-445.

²⁶ Ministry of Justice. (2019). *Prison Education & Library Services for adult prisons in England Policy Framework*. Ministry of Justice. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-and-library-services-for-adult-prisons-in-england>

²⁷ National Offender Management Service. (2019). *Guidance: Prison service instructions (PSIs)*. HM Prison and Probation Service and Ministry of Justice. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/prison-service-instructions-phis>

²⁸ Prison Reform Trust. (2022, June). Regime and Time out of cell. *Prison Reform Trust*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/adviceguide/regime-and-time-out-of-cell/>

²⁹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *Expectations: Criteria for assessing the treatment of and conditions for men in prison*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/expectations/>

Current practice in prison libraries

The standard operating model for prison libraries in England and Wales is to pay their local community counterparts a fee to provide stock and information support.³⁰ The aim of this partnership is to deliver on the legal requirements and expectations for prison libraries. However, public libraries across England and Wales are experiencing reduced funding and closures, which consequently impacts prison libraries.³¹ A study was conducted with prison library staff across the UK (which have similar operating models across each jurisdiction) highlighted the challenges of delivering library services within this model.³² Library staff said they felt isolated from the librarian profession due to a physical and professional distance in prisons that limit access to technology and development opportunities. This limits the ability of prison libraries to deliver a key function of their community counterparts, digital inclusion.³³

Since the Covid-19 pandemic there has been an increase in digital communication in personal and professional relationships, but prisons are still limited.³⁴ As society has rapidly deployed digital solutions, prisons have struggled to keep up across all services.³⁵ During the pandemic prison libraries were closed completely and most only provided a small selection of books on residential wings as there were limited digital alternatives, such as laptops.³⁶ HMIP annual reports following the Covid-19 pandemic reported that access to libraries remained limited and progress was slow and uneven across the prison estate.³⁷ Spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic, the prison estate is beginning to introduce more digital solutions across all services.³⁸ For prison libraries this can include better delivery of digital education, streamlined borrowing systems and e-materials via in-cell technology. But implementation does not match the pace of digitalisation in the community due to limitations in

³⁰ Krolak, L. (2019). *Books beyond bars: The transformative potential of prison libraries*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <https://epub.sub.uni-hamburg.de/epub/volltexte/2021/119466/pdf/369835eng.pdf>

³¹ Lynch, P., Tomas, P., & Hattenstone, A. (2024, September 3). Public libraries in 'crisis' as councils cut services. *BBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn9lexplel5o>

³² Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

³³ Gordon, J., Blackett, A., Fordham, R., Garraffa, M., Howard Wilsher, S., Leist, E., Ponzio, A., Smith, D., Welsh, A. and Xydopoulos, G. (2023). *Libraries for living, and for living better: The value and impact of public libraries in the East of England*. UEA Publishing Project. Retrieved from <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-living-and-living-better>

³⁴ Centre for Social Justice. (2021). *Digital Technology in Prisons: Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in UK prisons*. Centre for Social Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CSJJ8671-Digital-In-Prisons-INTS-210114-WEB.pdf>

³⁵ Edge, C., Hayward, A., Whitfield, A., & Hard, J. (2020). COVID-19: digital equivalence of health care in English prisons. *Lancet Digit Health*, 2(9), 450-452.

³⁶ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2021). *What happens to prisoners in a pandemic? A thematic review*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/what-happens-to-prisoners-in-a-pandemic/

³⁷ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual Report 2022-23* (HC 1451). HM Inspectorate of Prisons. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-chief-inspector-of-prisons-annual-report-2022-to-2023>

³⁸ Centre for Social Justice. (2021). *Digital Technology in Prisons: Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in UK prisons*. Centre for Social Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CSJJ8671-Digital-In-Prisons-INTS-210114-WEB.pdf>

infrastructure, such as old buildings, and security procedures.³⁹ Policies, infrastructure and staff need to have flexibility to adapt with fast paced technological advancements. The ‘smart prisons’ being introduced in England and Wales may create this foundation, but it is difficult yet to evaluate their impact.⁴⁰

Alongside feeling isolated in their profession with limited access to development and technology, prison library staff in the UK reported that dual management between local councils and prison governors led to poor direction from leadership and limited understanding of library work.⁴¹ Staff reported the metrics of success were often limited and overly simplistic. They focused on attendance numbers or book loans without acknowledging the broader impacts of the library around literacy, employment and wellbeing. This meant library work was overlooked, and staff were often excluded from strategy conversations. A standard approach to making quick resource decisions within budget constraints is quantitative key performance indicators, but staff in this study suggested supplementing data with qualitative user feedback would better reflect the library's impact.

Current structures make it difficult for prison libraries to deliver their purpose of supporting education and reading.⁴² Ofsted and HMIP conducted a review of reading education in prisons and found prison libraries were not fully utilised.⁴³ This was due to lack of prioritisation, limited session availability, schedule clashes and staff shortages. There were examples of passionate librarians facilitating initiatives such as Storybook Dads⁴⁴ and book clubs, but this was not supported by wider infrastructure or policy. In a 2023 review, Ofsted and HMIP found not much had changed and the solution required investment and promotion for libraries from governors.⁴⁵ Focus is often on other departments, such as education and resettlement, but library work heavily overlaps with these areas. Libraries need to be fully embedded in strategic and operational conversations to streamline services within prisons. This can be achieved within the current system and the CILIP Prison Libraries Group produced a framework for practice that includes positive case studies.⁴⁶

The following research explores trends in people’s experience of using prison libraries. The aim is to add to the evidence in this area and expand the conversation beyond librarianship research to help inform practice decisions.

³⁹ Centre for Social Justice. (2021). *Digital Technology in Prisons: Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in UK prisons*. Centre for Social Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CSJJ8671-Digital-In-Prisons-INTS-210114-WEB.pdf>

⁴⁰ Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service. (2022, March 4). Britain’s first ‘smart’ prison to drive down crime. *Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/britain-s-first-smart-prison-to-drive-down-crime>

⁴¹ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

⁴² Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

⁴³ Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2022). *Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons*. Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons>

⁴⁴ See <https://www.storybookdads.org.uk/>

⁴⁵ Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *The quality of reading education in prisons: one year on*. Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-quality-of-reading-education-in-prisons-one-year-on>

⁴⁶ CILIP Prison Libraries Group. (2023). *Making the Difference: An excellence framework for prison libraries*. CILIP Prison Libraries Group. Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/group/853bf809-d9aa-4165-8789-1cacd728e4ad/excellence_framework/excellence_framework.pdf

Methods and ethics

Secondary analysis was conducted for this article using data from surveys conducted by HMIP with people in prison since 2003.⁴⁷ This was accessed through the UK Data Service and used in accordance with their End User Licence Agreement.⁴⁸ The original purpose of the surveys was to inform each respective prison inspection. A self-completion questionnaire is distributed to a sample of people held in the prison being inspected and the data is used to triangulate findings alongside a range of other sources.⁴⁹ The questionnaire asks a series of multiple-choice and open-ended questions about the person's experience in their current prison and their demographic information. Topics in the questionnaire are designed to follow the person's 'journey' from reception through to release and align with HMIP's healthy prison tests.

Participant consent is obtained during the survey process but previously did not mention using data for wider research beyond the inspection. Before the data was originally published by HMIP, focus groups were conducted with people held in prison to gauge if they were happy for old survey data to be used more broadly.⁵⁰ During these focus groups they expressed they were content for survey data to be used for wider research that had the same aim as inspections of bringing change to prisons. One concern was access being too wide and enabling misrepresentation of their voice. Therefore, data was shared via the UK Data Service at two levels of detail, the most in-depth requiring an application to HMIP, and both requiring the user to agree to strict user guidelines. This analysis aligns with the aim to bring change to prisons by discussing practice and proposing future improvements. It discusses generalised groups using the aggregated version of this data to avoid misinterpretation of individual voices.

The survey data is published in separate yearly files and since 2003, there have been multiple iterations with new questions introduced in 2012, 2017 and 2021. For this secondary analysis the data was therefore first cleaned using R Studio to combine data from each inspection year into a singular comparable dataset. The current survey iteration has three questions related to the library:

- How often are you able to go to the library? (asked since 2003)
- Does the library have a wide enough range of materials to meet your needs? (asked since 2012)
- How often are you able to have library materials delivered to you? (asked since 2021)

Each inspection year includes different prisons of different types and therefore yearly comparisons should be drawn with caution. This applies especially to the year 2020/21 in which only a small number of full surveys took place before the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time the inspection process changed and did not include survey questions about the library. While there are

⁴⁷ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *HMIP Prisoner Survey: Adults in England and Wales, 2000-2023* (SN: 9161). UK Data Service. <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=9161>

⁴⁸ UK Data Service. (2024). *End User Licence Agreement*. UK Data Service. <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/app/uploads/cd137-enduserlicence.pdf>

⁴⁹ Reising, K., Bowstead, J. C., Hardwick, N., Meek, R., Riley, S., & Simmonds, J. (2023). *HMIP Prisoner Survey: Adults in England and Wales – User Manual (1st Edition) Volume A*. Royal Holloway University of London. https://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/9161/mrdoc/pdf/9161_hmip_prisoner_survey_user_guide_volume_a_2023.pdf

⁵⁰ Quinn, A., Shaw, C., Hardwick, N., Meek, R., Moore, C., Ranns, H., & Sahni, S. (2020). Prisoner Interpretations and Expectations for the Ethical Governance of HMIP Survey Data. *Criminal Justice Ethics*, 39(3), 163-182.

caveats for this analysis, it provides a valuable overview of prison libraries in England and Wales that can inform practice improvement.

The following analysis includes summary statistics of trends for the three library questions across each year that has comparable data. It then provides comparison based on aggregated data of respondent’s ethnicity, age and the type of prison in which they were held. Note that all NA responses (meaning the question was either not asked or not answered) were removed from calculating percentages. The latter element of analysis will only include data since 2017 due to the comparability of question responses. This also focuses the discourse on the most relevant practice.

Findings

Trends in prison libraries over the past 20 years

According to the responses in the survey, over the last 20 years, there has been consistently low access to prison libraries (see Chart 1). Less than 20% of survey respondents each year state they can go to the library more than once a week, except for 2020/21 (21%). In the first year of surveys following the Covid-19 pandemic, 2021/22, responses of ‘Never’ being able to attend the library peaked at 71%. Response in the following year, 2022/23, show access rates beginning to return, but people are still reporting less access than the already low levels pre-pandemic.

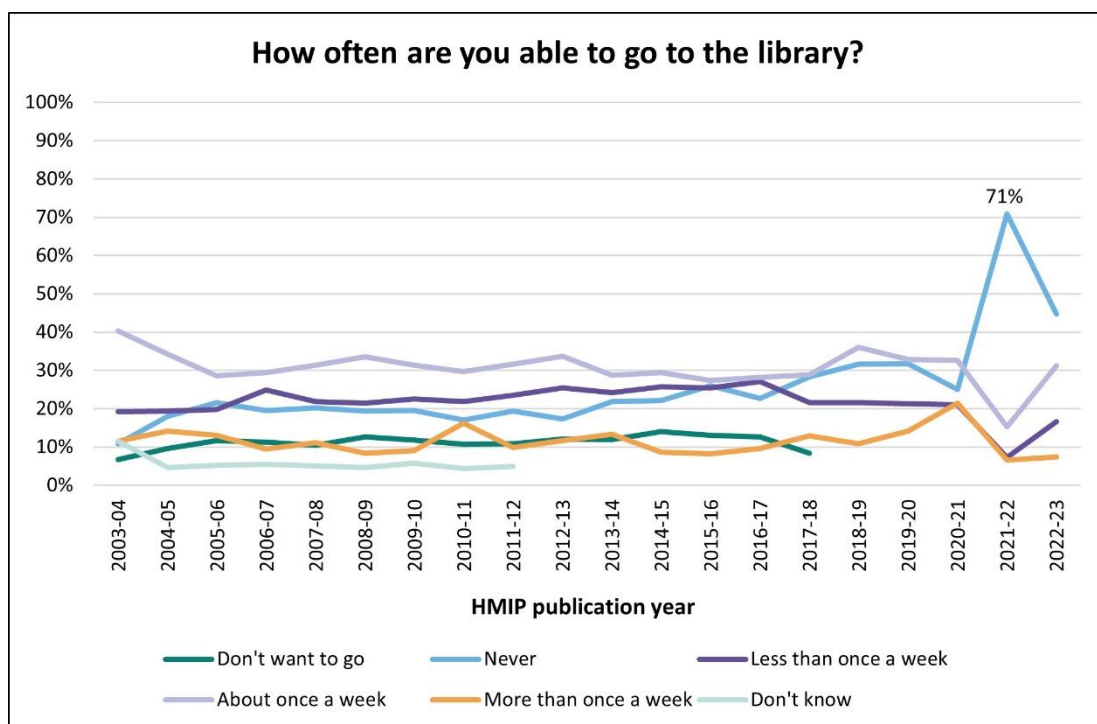


Chart 1

Each year around 60% of respondents that use the library reported having enough materials to meet their needs, since the question was introduced in 2012. There was a slight dip in 2015/16 to 53%, but levels returned to around 60% in subsequent years which suggests this year was an anomaly rather than a point of change. The question does not expand on what needs are not being

met. But this could relate to a limited range of genres, types of materials, language options or outdated legal information.

The survey question regarding materials being delivered to people on residential wings from the prison library was introduced in 2021/22. This reflected the change in practice during and after the Covid-19 pandemic as libraries adapted but limits the data available for analysis. The proportion of people reporting library materials being delivered 'Twice a week or more' reduced from 19% in 2021/22 to 9% in 2022/23. This may be due to increased access to the library space lowering the need for delivery to residential wings. But some people will always have limited access to the library for mobility or personal security reasons and should continue to benefit from this adaptation.

Access to prison libraries by demographics (since 2017)

People held in Category D prisons reported the most frequent access to prison libraries, with 43% stating they were able to go to the library 'Twice a week or more'. This is understandable given the freedom of movement permitted within Category D prisons. Survey responses suggest Category A prisons were the next best at providing frequent access. Of those in Category A prisons, 53% reported having access to the prison library 'About once a week'. The worst access appeared to be in local prisons and those for young adults, with 48% and 49% respectively reporting they 'Never go to the library'. This could be a result of Category A prisons having more stable populations and people new to prison or young adults not knowing what activities are available. However, there may be replicable practice from Category D and Category A prisons that could be applied across the secure estate.

Responses on access appeared largely consistent between ethnicities. Though the proportion of Black people in prison answering 'Never go to the library' was the highest (47%) for all ethnicity groups and lowest for White people in prison (39%). There may be clearer variation if the data were broken down into ethnicity subsets. This was not feasible for this study but warrants future exploration using the disaggregated HMIP survey data.

The youngest people in prison reported the lowest access to prison libraries. Of those aged 25 and under, 62% reported they 'Never go to the library'. When people did go to the library, the frequency of access appeared consistent across age groups. This could be due to younger people having less interest in using a library that does not have the same technology they are used to outside prison or being less familiar with what is available and how to request access. It is important for all people in prison to fully understand the resources available and for those resources to meet everyone's access needs.

The range of materials available from prison libraries by demographics (since 2017)

Similarly to access, people held in Category A and Category D prisons were more likely to report the library having enough materials to meet their needs (67% and 73% respectively). This is again likely due to them having more stable populations where librarians can better learn the needs of individuals. The next highest were women's and young adult prisons, with 63% in both reporting that the library carried a wide enough range of materials. This is a broad overview, and conclusions must be drawn with caution. However, there could be management differences within these types of prisons that could be beneficial across the estate. This could include processes that facilitate regular communication with prison populations to ensure their needs are met.

Between 40-50% of people from Asian, Black, Mixed and Other ethnic backgrounds in prison reported the library having a wide enough range of materials, compared to 63% of White people in prison. This suggests that prison libraries are not stocked for culturally diverse populations. Prison libraries are predominantly stocked through local public libraries which cater for the local people. But there is a disparity in prison populations, and it is unlikely to match local demographics due to movement across the secure estate. Therefore, this highlights the importance of understanding the diversity within prisons and across the secure estate and collaborative working between prison libraries.

The age of respondents appeared to correlate with reporting the prison library had a wide enough range to meet their needs. In the group of people aged 25 and under, 53% reported the range of materials being wide enough, compared to 72% aged 70 and over. This suggests that prison library materials are more catered towards older people in prison. This could be due to older people being more likely to access the library (as seen in the responses to the access question discussed above) and librarians therefore knowing their needs better. But could also be due to limited access to the technology that young people are used to, and materials not being regularly refreshed. This could be an area of investment to improve engagement with wider demographics.

Materials delivered from prison libraries by demographics (since 2021)

The pattern of most positive responses continued for Category A and Category D prisons for library materials being delivered. Out of respondents held in Category D prisons, 42% reported being able to have library materials delivered 'Twice a week or more'. In Category A prisons, 69% reported being able to have library materials delivered 'About once a week'. The higher frequency of library materials being delivered could be due to these populations being less able to collect materials from the library. For example, people in Category D prisons may be out at work and those in Category A prisons may have more movement restrictions for security. However, when viewed alongside responses to the library access question, it suggests libraries in these prisons provide a range of engagement opportunities to meet the different needs across their populations.

There was a generally consistent response across all ethnicity groups for being able to get library materials delivered. Though, notably over half (56%) of people of Other ethnic backgrounds reported being able to have materials delivered 'Less than once a week'. It is difficult to draw conclusions from such broad ethnicity groups, but it would be an area of interest for further research using the disaggregated HMIP survey data.

Responses for the question of materials being delivered were similar across age groups. However, the lowest engagement appeared to be from the youngest and oldest groups. Of those aged 25 and under, 46% reported being able to have materials delivered to them 'Less than once a week' and 45% of those aged 70 and over. Young people may not know delivery is an option and older people could need more support accessing materials that is only available in the library. Or these age groups may simply prefer going to the library if they want materials. This data does not provide a conclusive reason but does suggest different age groups have different engagement styles that should be catered for and acknowledged.

Conclusion

This article aims to elevate prison library research within the criminology field that is relevant to those in practice. There is emerging research into prison libraries that incorporates the disciplines for desistance, informal learning and critical librarianship.⁵¹ It highlights the wide-reaching benefits of prison libraries for people in prison, prison establishments and wider society. People in prison can learn pro-social skills that set them up to succeed in prison and on release.⁵² To achieve these benefits people in prison need to have access to library spaces and library materials. But this does not consistently happen as libraries are not prioritised within prison regimes.⁵³

This article highlights that people in prison are often unable to go to library spaces or get materials regularly delivered to residential wings. The range of available materials also does not meet everyone's needs. Libraries appear to function better in Category A and Category D prisons, while young adults and those from Black or Other ethnic backgrounds appear to have the worst engagement and experience with prison libraries. This research is limited to a broad overview of opinions on prison libraries from people in prison. The survey questions do not delve into why people engage with the library or how they want to engage with the library or what library materials would meet the needs of people in prison.

There needs to be clear policy-driven direction that incorporates the voice of people in prison alongside prison librarians, staff and management.⁵⁴ Policy should centre on the purpose of prison libraries and consider the holistic benefits for people in prison, prison establishments and wider society. Within a system-wide context of austerity, limited funding is a large barrier to achieving change, but the positive outcomes achieved by prison libraries warrant investment. Budget discussions should utilise a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures for prison libraries to make the best decisions. This will allow libraries to evolve with the reading interests and preferred reading approaches of people in prison. There have been previous funding models set by government that provide promising examples of how this could be achieved.⁵⁵

Further research should be conducted within establishments alongside system-wide overviews to guide more targeted improvements. This should incorporate the views of people in prison alongside prison librarians, staff and management. Research should consider the changing nature of how people in prison engage with services through technology and how this can be optimised. This will facilitate a realistic discussion on how prison libraries can fulfil their purpose and achieve positive outcomes for people in prison, the prison estate and wider society.

⁵¹ Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2018). What is the Role of the Prison Library? The Development of a Theoretical Foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120-139.

⁵² Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2018). What is the Role of the Prison Library? The Development of a Theoretical Foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120-139.

⁵³ Finlay, J. (2024). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70.

⁵⁴ Finlay, J., Hanlon, S., & Bates, J. (2024). An evidence-based approach to prison library provision: aligning policy and practice. *Journal of Prison Education Research*, 8(1), 1-16.

⁵⁵ Bowe, C. (2011). Recent Trends in UK Prison Libraries. *Library Trends*, 59(3), 427-445.