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LIS 570 - Final Project

Prison Libraries: Access and Censorship

Research Question:

What are the policy differences between prisons in Washington, Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York when it comes to library censorship?

Abstract:

Prison libraries are an important component of rehabilitation for inmates, especially since most will need to prepare for reentry. We can not expect inmates to become functioning members of society without access to enrichment and education, which is something a prison library can provide. Additionally, a prison librarian can help inmates find the information they need. They can provide guidance in picking out a new fiction series to read or help find the best GED study guide, just like they would in a public or academic library. Unlike a public or academic library, the prison librarian's access to materials and collection management is limited by the boundaries of the state prison system. Sometimes these rules are unclear and can be left up to individual or committee interpretation, which means there can be a lack of consistency in what materials are banned and what can be allowed. For our research, our group focused on examining documents and pre-existing data that would give us an understanding of each prison system's policies and procedures regarding collection development, legal reference materials, inmate mail, and any partnerships that exist between the public and institutional libraries. Our review focused on four states: New York, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington. Although the justifications behind censorship decisions were similar across institutions (e.g., security concerns, obscenity), collection development methods differed widely across each state, leading to different levels of access for inmates. For example, Pennsylvania is open about books it bans and a librarian must be a member of the committee that makes censorship decisions. In Texas, on the other hand, mailroom clerks are responsible for these decisions. Overall, there are substantial gaps in the research into this topic, creating opportunities for further investigations on this subject.

I. Introduction

Censorship is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “The suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.” In the United States, censorship by the government is unconstitutional, yet in some cases, with the aid of government-funded organizations, statewide prison systems practice mass censorship of literature and other forms of entertainment and reading materials in their facilities. Our research focuses on four states and how their prison library policies differ either through collection development, library access and advocacy, guidelines for censorship, and similar methods. Likewise, we seek to have a better understanding of how prison libraries curate diverse titles for prison inmates and how and to what extent censorship plays a role in each state’s process of data collection.

II. Literature review

A. Why certain books get banned in prison libraries

The literature around the exact policies used to ban books and other sources of readership such as magazines or studies in American prisons, and by whom those books get banned, is scarce. There is a debate around whether prison librarians themselves or correctional administrators have the ultimate authority to censor certain types of works based off of varying pre-set procedures (such as whether the book contains nudity) and how prison libraries operate (Conrad, 2016). Individual states are not required to publicize a comprehensive list of the books they have banned prisoners from accessing. To date, there are very few databases allowing researchers to locate a comprehensive list of all books inaccessible to inmates. Despite prisons not having a uniform, tangible policy on how books are banned and why, there do exist certain commonalities in censored literature, so that researchers can determine, based on logical observation, if one book is more likely to be banned in a prison library than another.

Books that are frequently censored include items deemed “Threat to security, pornography, social activism, theories of revolution, books which glamorize crime, hate speech/violence toward [a] certain group” (Bullinger, & Scott, 2017). Though there is not an exact reason we can reference as to why certain books get banned and others do not, we can narrow it down to two categories: those books are considered a risk to the institution and its personnel and/or the books are lascivious in nature, contain unethical or rebellious themes (such a protest/riots, murder, or rape) and are “counter to prisoner rehabilitation” (Arford, 2013). Because there is a lack of standardization and regulation in the policy for book curation in prison libraries, there is no way of measuring the impact that banning certain books has on prison inmates.

B. Balancing being both a prison employee and a librarian

If someone chooses to become a prison librarian, they might know that they will not be leading the more “traditional day-to-day life” of a public or academic librarian. For example, a prison librarian can be just as responsible for inmate safety and prison security as a correctional officer. In Washington State, the librarians have to complete the same trainings a correctional officer does to be able to work in the prison. These trainings include communication and teamwork skills, defense training, first aid, and learning about prison culture (Friederich, 2014). However, it appears that the biggest issue prison librarians face is the issue of censorship, which can vary between prisons, and a lack of access to information in general (Bullinger & Scott, 2017).

Librarians are often at odds with the basic tenets of librarianship and the private and government agencies that are in control of the individual prisons. The ALA’s “Prisoner’s Right to Read: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights” states that “Censorship is a process of exclusion by which authority rejects specific points of view. That material contains unpopular views or even repugnant content does not provide justification for censorship. Unlike censorship, selection is a process of inclusion that involves the search for materials, regardless of format, that represent diversity and a broad spectrum of ideas. The correctional library collection should reflect the needs of its community.” (American Library Association, 2014). However, that is simply not the reality of many prison libraries and prison librarians have to deal with the fact that censorship of certain materials is deemed necessary for safety reasons (Hart, 2017). In addition to dealing with censorship and strict prison rules, many prison libraries only have one librarian on staff to perform a variety of tasks. Legal research, tutoring and teaching, notarizing documents, hiring and training workers, and dealing with inmate disputes can all be expected of a prison librarian on top of the traditional library duties (Hart, 2018).

C. Collection development and advocacy: Working within boundaries to give inmates access to quality books and information.

However, there are libraries that have found ways to work within boundaries and develop more robust collections. Often, this takes a willingness for the prison librarians to work with the prison and state libraries to find an opportunity to collaborate. For example, the Washington State Department of Corrections has nine institutional libraries that work in collaboration with the Washington State Libraries. This allows for an interlibrary loans service, which is not possible without this type of collaboration (Friederich, 2014). On a grander scale, the New York Public Library (NYPL) opened a

public library within the women's unit on Rikers Island. This was after years of advocacy by the librarians of NYPL Correctional Services Team that spent decades pushing book carts around the prison, doing their best to fulfill inmates' requests (Peet, 2016). Prison librarians also solicit donations through Amazon wishlists and nonprofit organizations like Books To Prisoners, which work with prison libraries to collect donated book as well. What is important is that in both cases, they are not asking for just any books. The books requested are often what are requested by inmates that work within the boundaries of prison censorship. It is important for enrichment, education, and rehabilitation for inmates to have access to quality and contemporary books and materials just like any other library patron in the United States.

III. Methods

A. Document analysis

Our primary data collection method was document analysis. We collected 36 documents pertaining to prison library policies and censorship for the states of Washington, Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York. These included documents containing raw data (4 documents), news articles (8 documents), official policy documents (13 documents), press releases (2 documents), and webpages (10 documents). For data collection, we used Google Sheets to organize our documents by state, title, link, and notes.

We then divided work among group members, with each person responsible for analyzing the documents from each state. Using Google Sheets we kept track of our findings in a coding sheet.

B. Finding pre-existing data

Our secondary method was finding pre-existing data to help us understand what research has been done in the past, what gaps existed in that research, and where we might focus ours. We reviewed four articles/surveys. The sources included one academic article, two academic surveys, and one report commissioned by the Department of Education and performed by a university. We used Google Sheets to collect pre-existing data, beginning with sources obtained through previously submitted assignments. Data was sorted into the following categories: policy creation, purpose, types of materials, collection development procedures (focused on people), collection development procedures (focused on process), difficulty in collection development procedures, censorship and restrictions, and outreach.

IV. Findings

A. New York

Though the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) does not maintain a list of banned publications that can be accessed by the general public, they do have a bevy of detailed policy directive documents. We closely analyzed five of these: Inmate Correspondence Program Directive #4422, General Library Services Directive #4470, Law Libraries, Inmate Legal Assistance and Notary Public Services Directive #4483, Media Review Directive #4572, and the controversial Inmate Packages Directive #4911A. All of these policies have been updated within the past two years. We also examined documents related to Section 285 of New York's Education Law, which allows for partnerships between correctional libraries and state public library systems.

1. Collection development and library standards

As outlined in General Library Services Directive #4470 (2018), libraries are run through the Division of Library Service. The Division houses the General Library Program and Law Library Program under its jurisdiction. Both programs use the public library model and offer library-use instruction to individual inmates and groups. In terms of collection development, the goal of the Division of Library Service is to provide materials that will aid inmates on the path to rehabilitation and successful reentry into society. This includes material emphasizing career development, community and government services, education, and health and wellness. Acquisitions and individual facility policy development both fall under the purview of the Senior Librarian or Managing Library Clerk II (for smaller facilities). Maximum and medium security facilities are expected to have at least one full-time librarian who does a minimum of one program per month. Minimum security facilities must have basic, general libraries open during times when the majority of inmates can visit (typically late afternoons, evenings, and weekends).

Libraries are expected to ensure services to inmates in the general population, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) inmates, and inmates unable to visit library (such as inmates with disabilities or inmates in special housing units). Inmates in the general population must be allowed library access at least once a week and library services overall should be accessible seven days a week. Inmates without direct access to the library are served by a weekly book cart. In general, the book cart is expected to have enough materials for each inmate to have two books and one periodical/magazine. A current list of available materials must be made accessible to inmates and materials are rotated every 30 days. All of the materials are expected to be in good condition and be a

good representative sample of the same kinds of things offered to general population inmates.

2. Legal reference materials

Law Libraries, Inmate Legal Assistance and Notary Public Services Directive #4483 (2016) describes the rules regarding legal reference materials. Although each facility is responsible for making their own written policies and procedures, there are several general statewide requirements. Law libraries must be open at least seven hours a day and at least 6 days a week. Inmates in solitary must be given library access that is comparable to that of the general population. They can request two items per day, which must be delivered to their cells within 24 hours. Prisoners are permitted to request additional materials through the New York State Library Prisoner Services Project (PSP).

Inmates can receive legal assistance from the Law Library Supervisor and provisions must be made for inmates who are LEP, illiterate or have a disability. Inmates can also request legal advice from each other with the Law Library Supervisor's approval. All law libraries are required to provide writing materials, notary service, access to photocopying, and word processing. DOCCS has a formal complaint system in place if inmates feel the services they're receiving are inadequate.

3. Procedures for reviewing mailed materials

All incoming materials must go through the Media Review process, which is detailed in Media Review Directive #4572 (2018) (See Figure 1). Non-English publications are first sent in for translation before being up for Media Review. Each facility is required to form a Facility Media Review Committee (FMRC), made up of staff from Program Services and Security. The committee is expected to produce a monthly report of their activities and send it to the Central Office Media Review Committee (COMRC). The FMRC meets once a week unless there's nothing to review. Approved items are sent to inmates as soon as possible.

Publications can be banned based on the following criteria: sexually explicit (child porn, bestiality, etc... lacking in literary or artistic merit), incites violence based on identity (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc...), advocates rebellion against government authority, incites disobedience toward law enforcement or prison personnel, gives instructions on how to make guns and weapons, or gives instructions on martial arts and fighting.¹

¹ Further criteria includes: nothing written in code, no describing lock picking methods, no describing escape methods, no maps or survival techniques that could help with escape, no instructions on how to

If a publication is rejected, the FMRC must send the inmate a notice explaining why and also where specifically in the text the objection stems from. The sender of the item also receives a notification, and both sender and inmate may appeal the decision. Appeals are sent to the COMRC and must be filed within 30 days. There are three potential outcomes to appeals: approval, denial, and partial approval. Partial approval is possible when the objectionable portion of a publication is less than eight pages total or is a discrete chapter/section. In these cases, prison staff may cut out or blot out the offending portion before sending the publication to the inmate.

make alcohol or drugs, no describing how to smuggle contraband, no describing how to riot or discussing riot negotiation techniques, and no depicting gang signs.

New York DOCCS Media Review Process

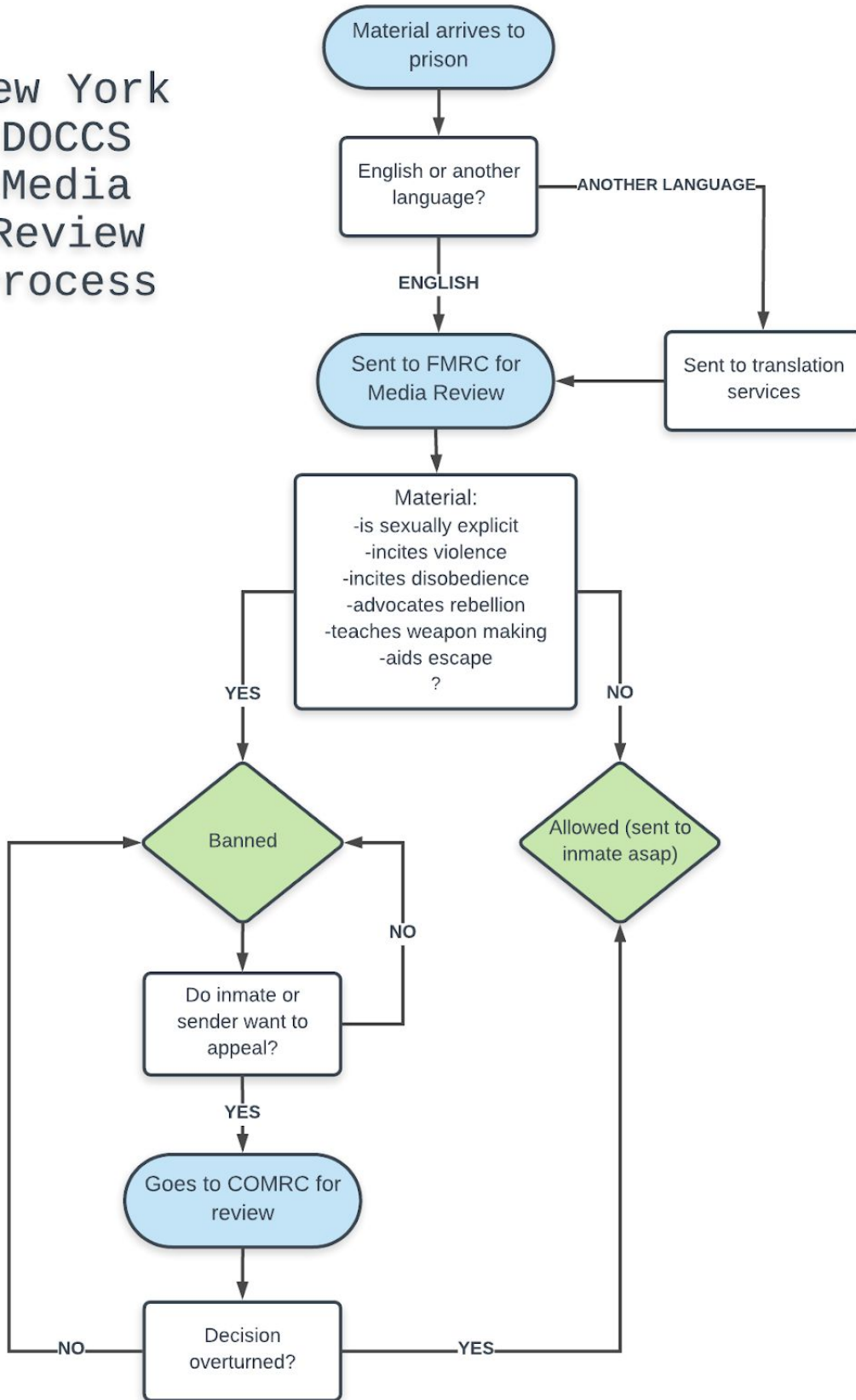


Figure 1 New York DOCCS Media Review Process flowchart

4. Public library system partnerships

Since 1984, Section 285 of NY State Education law has allowed correctional libraries to partner with public libraries to provide inmates with broader access to resources. Details regarding these policies are discussed in the Guidelines for State Aid Program (n.d.). These partnerships are intended as a supplement to correctional libraries, not a replacement. The guidelines also state that DOCCS is still responsible for maintaining library services within their facilities. Services are negotiated annually and public library systems are given a grant from State Education Department's Division of Library Development (SED-DLD) as reimbursement for services. All materials purchased with these funds belong to the public library system, not the correctional libraries.

The services provided include Interlibrary Loan, mobile book carts, access to the Talking Books and Braille Library (TBBL), and library card registration sessions to ensure that inmates are ready to access resources upon their release (Correctional Services, n.d.). In New York City, the public library system relies heavily on donations and maintains an Amazon wishlist based on inmate requests (What to Donate to Correctional Services, n.d.).² Currently, 17 out of 23 public library systems have state correctional facilities in their service area, and each system serves 1-8 facilities (Correctional Services, n.d.). To be eligible, correctional facilities must have a full-time certified librarian on staff (except for correctional camps and minimum security). If there's no librarian for three months, the public system can decide to suspend services (Guidelines for State Aid Program, n.d.).

5. Inmate packages and Directive #4911A

At the beginning of 2018, the New York DOCCS was set to pilot Directive #4911A regarding inmate packages at 3 of their facilities. Under the previous 2011 policy, prisoners were allowed to receive books from publishers, bookstores, book clubs, books-to-prisoners programs, and friends and family. In an effort to crack down on the smuggling in of contraband, Directive #4911A would have banned all incoming books unless they were purchased from one of five approved vendors (Gross, 2018).

At the time of the policy launch, this restriction meant that only 77 books were available. The books consisted of "five romance novels, 14 religious books, 24 drawing/coloring books, 22 puzzle books, a dictionary, a thesaurus and 11 how-to

² Nonfiction and genre books make up the bulk of the requests, and nonfiction requests have a very broad range of topics. The list includes: dictionaries, black history, architecture/interior design, comic books, dream interpretation, conspiracy theories, and love poems.

books” (Zoukis, 2018). Under the policy, purchasing books would have required a seven step process and the books would have been sold at a 30% price markup (Simpson, 2018). After widespread public outcry, Governor Andrew Cuomo rescinded the policy in mid-January, expressing a need to make sure the concerns of inmates’ families be addressed. Whether or not the policy will return in some form remains to be seen.

B. Pennsylvania

1. Collection development and library standards

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) has enacted detailed policies regarding library collection development, access to reading and leisure materials, and parameters for library services within its facilities. Recognizing that limitations on an inmate's right to access reading and leisure materials can be limited primarily for security concerns (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011), including preventing an escape, introducing drugs or weapons to the facility or inciting a disturbance (Inmate Mail and Incoming Publications, 2018), PADOC mandates that all facilities have a library collection that includes reference, non-fiction, fiction, periodicals and “other materials of varying interests.” (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011) Facilities are further commanded to have a robust collection that will enhance educational opportunities, non-English materials, various multimedia materials and offerings with specific information on “job opportunities, treatment agencies, and parole and probation as well as a full range of employment resource directories” and volumes that generally help inmates prepare for community reintegration. (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011) PADOC also requires its library facilities to have a certain number of items, which can vary based on the size of the inmate population. See Table 1. The facilities are also directed to establish local procedures for allowing access to reading materials, as well as an in-state interlibrary loan program.

Table 1 Minimum requirements for library materials.

Media	Inmate population	Minimum item count
Books	Over 1,000	5,000 items
	Under 1,000	2,500 items
	A minimum of 10% of the total collection must also include non-print materials in a variety of formats to correspond with local needs.	
Magazines	Over 1,000	20 titles
	Under 1,000	10 titles
Newspapers	Each facility must have “a variety of” major state and national papers.	

In addition to establishing parameters for collection development, PADOc has also set forth minimum requirements for library design and staffing. One policy mandates that facility libraries “*shall* be comfortable, functional in design, attractive in appearance, and readily accessible to both inmates and staff” (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011) (emphasis added). Particular examples found in policies include enough space for 20-30 users at one time, glare-free lighting, acoustical treatment, heating and air conditioning and electrical and network outlets to accommodate electronic and computer equipment (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011). Required furniture includes chairs, tables, computers, adequate shelving, filing cabinets and a bulletin board/display case (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011). A librarian with an MLIS must also be available to the facility to assist and coordinate all staff and training; if demand so requires, an inmate may be hired as a library aid (Access to Provided Legal Services, 2015; Delivery of Educational Services, 2011).

PADOc’s librarians are also required to provide particular services to inmates to meet their needs. These include notary services, translation services, library orientation and instruction on a regular basis, access to other library collections through state and regional library systems, networks, consortia or other cooperative relationships, access to information on foreign consular offices, access to special needs services (e.g., materials from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped) and library hours (including evenings and weekends) that do not compete with work assignments, visitation and other programs (Delivery of Educational Services, 2011).

2. Legal reference materials

PADOc further requires facilities to provide access to legal reference materials. PADOc policies list the required legal reference materials that must be housed at each facility, and further establishes that three types of law libraries must be maintained, depending on the population: a Main Law Library (general population); a Mini Law Library (non-general population) and a Capital Case Mini Law Library (death row inmates). Apart from the various law libraries’ names, the materials that must be part of their collection appear to be identical. Each facility is responsible for crafting local procedures to establish each law library’s hours (which must include evening and weekend hours), the manner in which inmates must request access to legal reference materials and any other aspect of operating each law library. Library staff are prohibited from giving legal advice, but legal assistance services may be available for inmates who are illiterate, lack the skills to understand English or have a disability affecting their ability to understand legal materials (Access to Provided Legal Services, 2015).

3. Procedures for reviewing mailed materials

Friends and family members regularly mail books and magazines to inmates. Before reaching the inmates, all reading materials are perused by the Incoming Publications Review Committee (IRPC), which consists of at least three personnel selected by the Facility Manager; one member must be a librarian, teacher or school principal. Once the IRPC has made a decision, that decision must be followed by all PADOc facilities (Inmate Mail and Incoming Publications, 2018). A list of reviewed publications is available to the public, along with the decision to permit or deny an item; if an item is denied, PADOc does not list a reason behind the denial (Denied Publications, n.d.).³ Generally speaking, reading materials can be denied if they contain information that is obscene, sexually explicit or racially inflammatory, advocate violence or criminal activity, give information about manufacturing weapons or escape devices, instruct on manufacturing poisons, drugs or alcohol, or otherwise create a danger within the correctional facility (Inmate Mail and Incoming Publications, 2018). If any part of an item violates the above restrictions, the entire item cannot be modified to remove the offensive portion and the IRPC will reject the publication (Inmate Mail and Incoming Publications, 2018). Should the IRPC deny an item, the inmate or publisher can go through an appeals process, which is outlined in PADOc policies (Inmate Mail and Incoming Publications, 2018).

4. Inmate requests and tablets/ebooks

In the Fall of 2018, PADOc updated its policies for accepting donated reading materials for inmates. Presently, inmates who want to receive donated books can list their preferred genres and PADOc works with donation organizations to find books that meet inmates' requests (Department of Corrections, 2018). Inmates also have access to newly-installed kiosks, from which they can order books for a discounted rate. Two weeks after these policies went into effect, inmates had requested nearly 4,000 publications (Department of Corrections, 2018).⁴

Inmates also have the option of purchasing tablets from which they can download ebooks, send emails, listen to music or play games (eBooks, n.d., Tablets, n.d.). All of these services have an associated cost (See Table 2). Inmates can access

³ Perusing the Reviewed Publications List, it is difficult to find a consistent theme. For example, some surprising titles that have been denied include particular issues of *Popular Science*, *Field and Stream* and *Worker's World*. On other hand, the IRPC has permitted titles such as *Ivy League Stripper*, *Island Girls* *Tropical Lesbian Erotica* and *Hot Cougar Sex* (Denied Publications, n.d.).

⁴ In implementing this new system, PADOc officials learned that the most requested book was a dictionary. In response to this need, PADOc now has dictionaries available for free to any inmate who requests one (Department of Corrections, 2018).

approximately 8,500 ebooks through these devices, at varying costs (GTL E-book Availability List, n.d.). Upon release, inmates may keep their tablets (Tablets, n.d.).

Table 2 Services available through tablets and their related costs.

Tablets services/activities	Costs
Tablet	\$147.00 plus tax
Battery	\$47.00
Charger	\$11.25 plus tax
Sending an email	\$0.25
Song	\$1.80 plus tax
Ebooks	Variable
Games	Variable

C. Texas

1. Prison library collection development

Information regarding how the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) collects and develops titles is more difficult to acquire than their procedures for reviewing mailed materials. Each prison facility must have a written plan for recreational library services for inmates, and it must be approved by the Texas Commission on Jail Standards but this plan does not need to be made public. In most cases, prison library collection development is regulated by The Department of Public Safety (DPS) and facilities are operated by TDCJ. Librarians and library clerks operate unit libraries and maintain inventories of a wide variety of titles such as reference collections, educational titles, magazines, and resources for recreational readings. However, TDCJ alone maintains policies for banning books and no further written guidelines exist.

2. Legal reference materials

Texas requires a law library to be maintained in every unit, overseen by that unit's access to courts (ATC) Supervisor. Inmates may petition the ATC Supervisor for further materials by submitting a written request justifying the need (Offender Orientation Handbook, 121). The policy lists 36 specific items or their equivalents that must be made available to inmates, such as federal and state criminal codes, law dictionaries, and handbooks (Offender Orientation Handbook, 121-123). Law libraries are expected to make writing instruments, paper, postage, and envelopes, and notary

services available for inmate use. Law libraries must have a posted schedule with at least one open period on the weekend. Inmates must be allowed at least 10 hours a week to visit the library and extra time may be granted if approved by the ATC Supervisor (Offender Orientation Handbook, 123-124). In addition to law library access, inmates are also permitted to assist each other on legal matters if given staff approval (Offender Orientation Handbook, 126).

3. Handling offender correspondence

TDCJ has laid out detailed procedures that allow inmates access to publications that do not threaten the security and good order of prison system. Among guidelines is a list of over 15,000 titles banned by the TDCJ, which includes humor titles and children's literature like *Charlie Brown Christmas* but excludes the infamous *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler.

There is only one books-to-prisoners program that exists in Texas, which is a community service-based organization. Publications can be sent through these means or through general correspondence only through a publisher, book club or from a bookstore. TDCJ has statewide policies regarding the curation of books through general correspondence. TDCJ has outlined that the first traditional stage of decision making regarding book censorship is with mailroom officers, who are unlikely to have been formally trained in Library and information Science. As books come in, these officers compare them against TDCJ policy and guidelines stated below. Prisoners have the right to appeal this decision but this appeal can only happen once and the Mail System Coordinators Panel (MSCP) and Directors Review Committee (DRC) must review the case.

The following sets forth the publicly available guidelines by which the TDCJ can reject books:⁵

1. Rejection [of Offender Correspondence] Due to Content
 - a. It contains contraband that cannot be removed;
 - b. It contains information regarding the manufacture of explosives, weapons, or drugs;
 - c. It contains material that a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communication information designed to achieve the breakdown of prisons through offender disruption such as strikes, riots, or STG activity;

⁵ Board Policy. Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Uniform offender correspondence rules. August 23, 2013. Number: BP-03.91 (rev. 3). Supersedes: BP-03.91 (rev. 2) February 11, 2010.

- d. A specific determination has been made that the publication contains graphic presentations of sexual behavior that is in violation of the law, such as rape, incest, sex with a minor, necrophilia, or bondage;
- e. It contains sexually explicit images. Publications shall not be prohibited solely because the publication displays naked or partially covered buttocks. Subject to review by the MSCP and on a case-by-case basis, publications constituting educational, medical, scientific, or artistic materials, including but not limited to, anatomy medical reference books, general practitioner reference books or guides, *National Geographic*, or artistic reference material depicting historical, modern, or postmodern era art, may be permitted; or
- f. It contains materials on the setting up and operation of criminal schemes by lawful authorities charged with the responsibility for detecting such illegal activity.

4. Appealing books banned by MSCP and DRC

Unless prisoners file a lawsuit, which many prisoners cannot do because of lack of access, the MSCP and DRC conclusive decision is final. Contrary to other prison systems in the country, data suggests prison librarians are not included--or unlikely to be included--in collection development. MSCP and unit mailroom staff render decisions upon inspection of publications. Approximately 87 percent of books are censored this way and 13 percent allowed. Following appeal, 77.53 percent are permanently banned. Before appeal, the prisoner is not allowed to see the book to formulate an intelligent appeal. Upon being appealed, the prisoner is informed of the book's status. If banned, the title is banned across all TDCJ. The list of banned books in the Texas prison system has been made public.

5. Inmates access to prison libraries

Access to prison libraries in the Texas prison library system is often seen as a privilege that can be revoked at any time. Even without access to prison libraries being revoked, many prisoners still have difficulties regularly visiting the library because of budget cuts to TDCJ that ensure some libraries close on weekends and maintain irregular library hours, limited library passes for inmate, and lack of resources due to the increasing growth of Texas prison populations and decreased funding. Research suggests that library access itself is often at the discretion of the prison guards.

D. Washington

1. Collection development and library standards

All prison libraries in Washington, more commonly referred to as “institutional libraries,” are overseen by the Department of Corrections and Washington State Libraries. Institutional libraries in Washington follow the same protocols and policies, with each function being explicitly described in Department of Corrections policies and procedures. Any disagreements about how policies are followed, the banning of certain materials, and availability of resources are reviewed by the Correctional Manager and the Washington State Branch Library Services Program Manager, and ultimately the Department Secretary and State Librarian if necessary (DOC Policy Number 510.010). The main purpose of the institutional library is to provide educational and recreational materials for inmates, which in turn will fulfill their information needs and assist with re-entry. This goes beyond general study guides and law materials, as different materials and genres provide opportunities for enrichment; science fiction, graphic novels, and “how-to” books are very popular among inmates at the correctional facilities in Washington. Inmates can also check-out approved videos, audio books, and CDs (Secretary Of State’s Office, 2018).

There are some types of materials that are explicitly banned, as is the same with most prison systems. Sexually explicit materials are not allowed, as well as materials that describe how to make alcohol, weapons, or drugs. Additionally, phone books or other directories that contain address and phone numbers are not allowed (DOC Policies- Library Services 510.010, 2012).

2. Legal reference materials

In Washington, all Level 3 facilities must have one Law Library and a Law Librarian. Law Librarians are tasked with finding specialized attorneys for individuals with disabilities, hiring and training inmates as clerks, providing legal documents and guidance, and providing legal referral as necessary. While working in the Law Library, the librarian must also make sure the library always contains up-to-date constitutional, statutory, and case materials; applicable state and federal court rules; and practice treatises (DOC Policies- Legal Access for Incarcerated Individuals 590.500, 2018). But the assistance doesn’t stop there, as the Law Library also has to ensure the inmates have the ability to properly research and prepare for their court cases and study the law. For instance, inmates need to purchase materials like pencils, paper, and envelopes from the prison commissary. However, if they run out of materials while working in the Law Library, the librarian can provide additional paper and writing tools to the inmate. The Law Library also gives the inmates access to carbon paper, which is otherwise not accessible. Working in the Law Library also gives the inmates a chance to help each

other with their legal research. They are allowed to read each other's case materials and assist in preparing legal documents, which is something the Superintendent does not have to necessarily allow outside of the Law Library (DOC Policies- Legal Access for Incarcerated Individuals 590.500, 2018).

3. Procedures for reviewing mailed materials

The receipt of books, magazines, CDs/DVDs, and other publications must meet certain criteria before they are allowed to an inmate, and are considered different than general incoming mail. Inmates can receive any type of publication directly from the publisher, or from approved vendors (including the Amazon Wish List program) and also from approved nonprofit organizations (DOC Policies- Mail For Prison Offenders 450.100, 2017). These materials seem to be given the benefit of the doubt that they fulfill the requirements for being deemed acceptable. However, there are many instances where materials have to go under further review. For example, materials not in English or that are in Braille need to be sent for further review, and these materials cannot be sent by another inmate or the family of another inmate. Questionable materials are reviewed by committee, and if the material is rejected the inmate is supposed to receive notice. On a positive note, the official policy states that "No publications will be withheld solely on the basis of their appeal to a particular ethnic, racial, religious, or political group, or sexual orientation" (DOC Policies- Mail For Prison Offenders 450.100, 2017).

4. Public library system partnerships

Washington State Libraries works in tandem with all of the state's institutional libraries. The state library is managed by the Washington Secretary of State. This includes two state hospitals and nine correction centers spread out across the state. Interlibrary loan services are available at all of the minimum security facilities, which allows inmates to access materials not within the walls of the facility where they are housed (Friederich, 2018). Additionally, the Washington State Library has individual Amazon wishlists for every institution they serve, customized by the prison library staff to meet patron requests and fill gaps in the collection. These wishlists contain a variety of materials: self-help books, drawing/sketching guides, magazine subscriptions, study guides, popular fiction, and memoirs (Institutional Library Services, 2018).

E. Trustworthiness of data and findings

Our research project primarily involved the analysis of government documents, which are primary sources. For secondary sources, we relied on articles from reputable academic journals and news organizations. Because we directly reviewed and analyzed

policies that correctional institution libraries follow in collection development decisions, we are confident that our findings are credible and trustworthy.

V. Discussion

Past research has primarily explored the following themes:

- Prison libraries generally have a goal of education, recreation, and rehabilitation
- There is similar criteria for banning books across different correctional systems (primarily sexual and/or violent content)
- Most states have no formal collection development policy
- There is a perpetual lack of consistency and transparency in policies across the country

Though our sample was limited to four states, our findings show that these themes are still prevalent and that inconsistency and transparency remain to be an issue. There was variety in the level of transparency surrounding collection development and access policies, as well as which particular books are banned and why. All four states had similar criteria regarding banning incoming publications, but differed in the level of transparency surrounding the process. In Texas, inmates and senders do not have to be notified that a publication is being reviewed and decisions surrounding banning books appear to be made by mailroom staff, not librarians. New York has easily accessible policies and procedures, but no banned books list. Texas is the opposite; their banned books list is available, but their policies are generally opaque. Washington is the only state that provides a rationale for why each individual item was banned. Because federal guidelines are so minimal⁶ and state laws vary so much, this inconsistency will likely remain.

Though there was overlap between our findings and past research, we also encountered new areas that have not yet been explored in depth. A major theme that came up in our research is the intersection between prison libraries and digital media access. Within the past year, approximately 19 states have begun making tablets available to inmates (Kruzman, 2018). Tablets can be beneficial to inmates as a connection to the outside world. With the way technology is constantly changing, having access to tablets can also help ensure inmates are not completely out of their depth when they reenter society.

⁶ The Federal Bureau of Prisons library policy is only 3 pages long and hasn't been updated since 1997. It stipulates that facilities must have general libraries and law libraries with a variety of materials, staffed by trained librarians, in a comfortable, accessible location. However, it contains no guidelines regarding process and implementation.

However, these tablet programs are not without controversy. When Pennsylvania initially launched their tablet program earlier this year, their original intention was to also ban book donation programs. The rationale was that cutting back on books also cuts back on opportunities to smuggle in contraband. Tablets were viewed as a replacement in terms of access, but this did not factor in the cost differential between free donated books and expensive eBooks. The state reversed the decision and now allows both book donations and tablets (DOC Announces Book, Publications Policy, 2018).

In New York, the DOCCS has recently negotiated a free tablet deal with JPay, a technology company that provides services to incarcerated people (Kaufman, 2018). The program will provide 50,000 prisoners with free tablets, but some privacy concerns have been raised because the tablets don't allow prisoners to send confidential emails to their attorneys (Kaufman, 2018). Because patron privacy is key tenet of librarianship, privacy issues with tablets may place prison librarians in a difficult position in the future.

Another gap for future research is our original research question: are there differences in written or practical procedures and standards governing censorship of reading materials in men's and women's prison libraries? Women are the most rapidly growing group of incarcerated people in the US, but their concerns are often overlooked in general discussions about prisons (Lartey, 2016). This was ultimately outside the scope of our research due to time and access constraints, but future researchers who are able to gain information regarding specific prisons may be able to investigate this further. Differences between men's, women's, and juvenile facilities is another avenue worth exploring.

VI. Conclusion

There is limited consistency across prison library collection development policies. While they often contain similar rationale for banning items (security concerns, obscenity, inciting violence, etc.) the methods and openness behind collection development policies varied widely across the four states studied here. Although prison librarians work hard to provide a wide variety of materials for inmate recreation, legal research, and to aid in reentry, the inconsistencies across different states can lead to different levels of access to reading materials, depending on where an inmate is confined. In addition to the issue of access to information, inconsistent and opaque policies can lead to absurd results in censorship decisions, such as Texas prisons banning Charlie Brown books, but permitting *Mein Kampf*. Overall, many gaps exist in the research on this topic, with opportunities for future research.

VII. Reflection

Our research project was truly a collaborative effort. Each member of our team approached the work in a thoughtful and engaged manner. The work was split equitably and we all made strong contributions in developing ideas, writing, data collection, and data organization. This made us an effective team despite the distance between us.

However, using different methods to gather data could have made our project stronger. For instance, though pre-existing data was extensive, a lot of data came from older studies. Interviewing current prison librarians or prison library staff could have given us a more detailed view of how, for instance, book censorship has changed with access to things like the internet. This could have changed the scope of our research.

These types of data collection techniques would not have been timely, however. Because of the time sensitivity of our project, we would have likely not been able to explore these methods as thoroughly as possible, which could be damaging to the research project.

Along with interviews of prison library staff, it would have been interesting to get the perspective of organizations that work closely with prison libraries or that may strongly influence the collection development process such as the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Aside from using different data collection methods, the scope of this project could have been narrowed down to a specific state, which would have led to more concentrated results. With that being said, the differences between policies vary so much from state to state that applicability is not guaranteed.

Finally, something we all could have done better was creating our research question. A lot of the time we spent on this project was refining a broad research question. In retrospect, taking more time to speak one-on-one with the professor early on would have allowed us to settle on an appropriate research question sooner into the quarter and possibly shift our focus to other areas of our research.

One of the most valuable lessons we learned about research and the research process was the gravity and importance of a refined research question. As stated above, something we struggled with as a collective was narrowing the scope of our research to make it 1) less general and 2) fit within the time frame we were limited to. At the start of our project, it was simple to find commonality in our subject. We were all enthusiastic about looking deeper into prison libraries. Translating that enthusiasm into something researchable proved to be more difficult than any of us thought and took numerous attempts, including a one-on-one meeting with the professor. In this same vein, we learned the value of homing in on particular niches within a broader subject and the challenges with not doing this. We divided our research into four parts, focusing on the collection development processes and guidelines for New York, Washington,

Texas and Pennsylvania. This small glimpse alone yielded a large amount of data and showed us the stark differences between collection procedures across the country.

BOOKS BEHIND BARS

Want to know more about how to help institutional libraries and inmates? Check out our starter guide!

GET FAMILIAR WITH WHAT GETS BANNED

Though every prison system is different, there are some topics that are usually banned for inmates. These typically include:



- Sexually Explicit & Violent Materials
- "How To" guides to making weapons, alcohol, or drugs
- Themes encourage unsafe/illegal activities while incarcerated, such as rioting or breaking other conduct rules.

DONATE!

Remember: This is about filling a community need, not a personal need. Be prepared to donate what is requested even if it is outside of your personal preference.



- Follow all of the instructions given by the prison librarian and/or the nonprofit organization! This gives the inmates and/or library the best chance of receiving the materials.
- Donate money: <https://libguides.ala.org/book-donations/bookstoprisons>

GET FAMILIAR WITH WHAT IS NEEDED

There are certain items libraries need more than others, and certain types of literature inmates like as well!



- See if your state offers a "wishlist" program for institutional libraries.
- Search for nonprofit organizations that fulfill requests from inmates and prison librarians

PAY ATTENTION!

What has happened in your state recently? If you're not sure, please take a minute to research, or even just read your state's list of banned books if available.



- You may be surprised to find some controversy regarding lack of access for prisoners, broad censorship issues, lack of ability to donate materials, or a mixture of all of those and more.
- If you want to make change, contact your state representative! Tell them your thoughts on the issue.

This infographic is intended to be used in tandem with the Prison Libraries: Access and Censorship project for LIS 570 by Adrian Applin, Anna Price, Emily Fix, and Lauren Shade.

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