
Library Services in Spanish Prisons: Current State of Affairs

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the defining characteristics of the organizational model for the provision of library services in Spanish prisons. The author provides data about the correctional facilities and the offender population and focuses on several issues that impact on the organization and operation of prison libraries. The article concludes with a reflection on the limitations of the current library service model.

INTRODUCTION

In the search for validation of library services in prisons, we encounter the groundbreaking work of Beccaria or Concepción Arenal, early specialists in this area. The theories presented by these authors resulted in major philosophical changes that shaped the Spanish prison system over many years. In the eighteenth century, Beccaria (1997 [1764]) was the first to propose that the best way to prevent crime is to educate those who commit it. A century later, Concepción Arenal (1993–94 [1894–1913]) also supported these innovative ideas. This coincided with the attempt of other criminologists to introduce the so-called “American system,” which was based on the principles of a humane and rational treatment of incarcerated individuals. These two schools of thought became the foundation for a profound reform of the Spanish prison system, carried out during the nineteenth century. At the International Penitentiary Congress held in Rome at the end of that century, Concepción Arenal presented a proposal that called for the incorporation of educational and recreational activities into prison life, such as music, literature, arts and crafts, physical education, and religious studies. These programs would be designed to

foster positive personal growth, and the inmates would decide themselves whether or not to participate. The proposal also included the creation of newspapers written and printed inside prisons by the inmates themselves.

In 1870, Felipe Picatoste (1870) submitted the first report to the Ministry of Public Administration (Ministro de Fomento at that time) mentioning the need to establish public libraries in prisons for educational purposes. In 1873, the first schools were created in correctional facilities, and in 1874 the first libraries opened to support these schools. The expectation was that by 1885 Spain would have a total of thirty-four prison libraries with a total collection of 4,000 volumes. This goal, however, was never achieved.

During the first years of the twentieth century, the structure of prison library services was guided by the model proposed by María Moliner (Plan de Bibliotecas de María Moliner). Under this model "special" libraries would become organized more like local public libraries, but administered by the national government (Orera, 2001). This idea was short-lived, and the following years were marked by general disinterest and neglect of prison libraries by public authorities. It was only through the determination and dedication of education and religious program staff in the prisons that the libraries were able to survive.

The structure of the Spanish prison library system, as we know it today, came into existence in the 1970s through the Comprehensive Law 1/1979 General Penitentiary Act (la Ley Orgánica General Penitenciaria).¹ This law mandates that all correctional facilities have a library to meet the educational, informational, and recreational needs of inmates. Similarly, the establishment in 1978 of the autonomous communities (self-governing regional governments) contributed to the development of the current model in regard to the operation of libraries and a systematic library policy. Beginning in the 1980s, this model included cooperative library agreements (*acuerdos de cooperación bibliotecaria*) between the regional ministries of culture (*ministerio de cultura*) and the then national Ministry of Justice.

THE SPANISH ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

The organizational model for prison libraries in Spain is similar to that of other Mediterranean countries, like France and Italy (Manganelli, 1989), where the parameters of library management and operation are specified by the cooperative agreements between individual correctional facilities and public/private entities.² In Spain, three factors have influenced the effectiveness of this collaborative model: (1) the structural changes that have occurred within the Ministry of the Interior (which has responsibility for the operation of correctional facilities); (2) the agreements with the Ministry of Culture; and (3) the involvement of the independent Autonomous Community governments in the provision of prison library services.

In accordance with the General Penitentiary Act of 1979 (Ley Penitenciaria de 1979), prison libraries have traditionally been connected with the schools in the institutions. Teachers, with the help of prisoners, were responsible for managing the libraries. Operational procedures state that maintenance of collections, acquisition of materials, technical processing of materials, and user services, shall be the responsibility of the individual prison facilities, even though no funding is provided for these functions.

Starting in 1999, new regulations removed the libraries from the prison education departments.³ The libraries were now to be administered directly by the cultural department of the Subdirectorate General of Prison Treatment and Management (Subdirección General de Gestión y Tratamiento), a unit charged with the management of various programs for inmates. A result of this change was the creation of a new "training coordinator" (*coordinador de formación*) position. This position is not held by a teacher but by a prison program official. At some prison sites, professional librarians were also hired through contracts. The first directives for the organization and operation of the libraries under the new structure were released in 2001. In reality, however, the new structure did not completely sever the ties between the libraries and the prison schools. The libraries remain closely connected with the education department, and many library activities are still educational in nature, sometimes to the detriment of information functions and recreational services that have long been the core of the public library mission. Library professionals are aware of this situation and have often demanded that all services appropriate for a public library be provided.

The cooperative agreements signed between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Justice in 1983 marked the beginning of a commitment at the national level to support the prison system in the areas of library management and collection development. This commitment has been honored to date and, as previously mentioned, constitutes a fundamental pillar of the Spanish prison library model. As the result of the cooperation agreements, many libraries have seen an increase in the size of their collections, library staff receive guidance and training, and library statistics are now collected and made available.

In 1989, the Directorate General of Penitentiary Institutions (Dirección General de Instituciones Penitenciarias) conducted a study of the state of prison libraries in Spain. The study's findings led to a series of reforms and library enhancements over the next two years. The study had examined the content of existing collections at eleven prison libraries, and new materials were purchased and distributed to fill deficient areas in these collections, campaigns to promote reading were carried out, and training for library managers were provided. As of 1992, the two ministries (Culture and Interior) have upheld their agreements for continuous collection enhancement and development of cultural programs.

In 2005, the Ministry of Culture extended its ambitious National Reading Campaign (Planes de Fomento de Lectura) to correctional institutions. This campaign was part of a wider effort to promote literature and libraries around the country. As part of the new initiative, the correctional facilities created “reading introduction teams” (*equipos de iniciación a la lectura*), comprised of library professionals and prison staff, who organized events that encouraged reading and writing and arranged encounters with authors and other prominent individuals in the world of culture and the arts. All these activities took place under the direction of a technical monitoring committee” (*comisión técnica de seguimiento*), charged with both planning and evaluation of program activities.

The Ministry of Culture has continued to support these “reading introduction teams,” and in 2008 there were sixty-seven active teams in sixty-six correctional facilities.⁴ The teams receive books and materials from the ministry. They conduct two classes on reading methods, invite authors suggested by the prison administration, and publish short stories written by the inmates as part of an initiative called “To the Letter” (*Al pie de la letra*). The Ministry of Culture allocates a total of 25,000 EUR to these programs. In return, the Ministry of the Interior has committed an equal sum of 25,000 EUR to increase the acquisition of library materials, to improve library facilities and infrastructure, and to support individuals who attend training.

The third pillar to support the operation of the prison libraries consists of legislative measures by the autonomous community governments to promote and enhance culture in their respective regions. In reality, not all the ensuing regulations consider prison libraries as intrinsic parts of the public library system. Only the communities of Asturias, Castilla y León, Galicia y Murcia, and Cataluña refer specifically to prison libraries in their administrative guidelines, although in recent years other communities, including Castilla-La Mancha, have developed concrete plans for future action on this matter. Regardless of how the regional legislation develops, the 2005 regulations from the Ministry of Culture pertaining to the National Reading Campaign require that public libraries administered by the autonomous communities cooperate with correctional libraries, although at present this mandate is not entirely fulfilled.

In this connection it should be noted that in 2006 the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha signed an agreement with the national Directorate General of Penitentiary Institutions to conduct a study of the six prison libraries located in the community.⁵ This initial step led to the development of a joint action plan for the following years in the autonomous community. Action items included an examination of the library collections, library premises, and library operations, at the six prison sites. The plan also included the purchase of library materials, the provision of courses in library science, the promotion of reading and theater activities,

and the installation of computer software. Most importantly, however, the action plan called for the incorporation of the six prison libraries into the Network of Public Libraries of Castilla-La Mancha (Red Pública de Bibliotecas de Castilla-La Mancha). The prisons would be responsible for incorporating all these resources and programs into the cultural programs of the facility and for providing training to nonprison staff who come into the facility to work with these programs. The prisons would also be responsible for support and maintenance of the computer hardware.

The Community of Aragón provides an interesting example of how one autonomous community has adopted the model of another community (Castilla-La Mancha) for providing library services in its own three prisons through the regional public library system. In 2010, the Library of Aragón (Biblioteca de Aragón), the central library in the regional system, signed an agreement to examine the collections of the three prison libraries, to weed and update existing materials, to incorporate the libraries into the "Newspapers of the World" ("Diarios del Mundo") program (which provides access to international news for foreign inmates), to provide reading programs, and to improve library space and equipment.

The Autonomous Community of Cataluña is unique, since it is the only community that, since 1983, has had its own separate prison system. This gives the prison administration more flexibility and independence in the management of its facilities.⁶ Currently the libraries of the eleven correctional facilities in Cataluña are included in the Informal Education Program (Programa de Educación no Formal) and fall under the supervision of the education department of the Sub-directorate of Treatment (Subdirección de Tratamiento). Like at the national level where the libraries are not part of the prison schools, in Cataluña they work closely with the schools as under the "Special Library Program" ("Programa específico de Bibliotecas"). In 2007, the *Guidelines for Prison Libraries* were published in Cataluña. At present these guidelines are being used in all the correctional facilities in the region (Comalat & Sule, 2007). In 2009, the Departments of Justice and Culture of the regional governing body, the Generalitat, formally agreed to adopt and put into effect the *Guidelines for Prison Libraries*. This will mean a significant enhancement of the collections through regular annual purchases of new materials, with emphasis on materials in other languages, easy-to-read materials for beginning readers, and periodical subscriptions. The prison libraries will become members of the Catalonian library system and will be able to access the Cataluña's Public Library union catalog (*catálogo de Lectura Pública de Cataluña*). Staff will also receive training and support for reading programs.

CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES AND THE PRISONER POPULATION

Recent legal amendments have brought about significant changes to the administrative structure of the Spanish prison system and have created

new types of correctional institutions as well as new forms of alternative sentences.⁷ In this context, the reintegration centers (*centros de inserción social*) are of particular interest. These centers provide an alternative to continuous confinement, such as open housing or weekend sentencing, where the offenders can participate in programs offered in the community.

At present Spain has a total of eighty-four correctional facilities, eleven of which are located in the Autonomous Community of Cataluña. Located in urban areas, all function as self-sufficient centers with modern facilities and operations that are appropriate for the needs and characteristics of the inmate population.

In terms of the inmate population, the largest group falls into the age range of thirty-one to forty-one years, is of Spanish origin, and is from an urban area. This is what one might describe as the "typical" inmate. The recidivism rate is high (over 60 percent), which accounts for the second largest group being between forty and fifty years. The average sentence served is four to eight years. The high recidivism rate is partly related to the fact that many inmates are released into their former marginalized urban neighborhoods, and multiple shorter sentences for smaller crimes are often combined into a single longer sentence.

Statistics show a significant increase in the prison population from 2001 to 2006, and the facilities are 30 percent over capacity.⁸ The prison population increased 7.35 percent from 2007 to 2008, and by 2009 the annual increase reached 10 percent. At the beginning of 2010, the total prison population stood at 76,863. The number of youth offenders is increasing rapidly. In 2009 the population of incarcerated youth rose fourteen percent. In 2009, there were 6,991 young people between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five, and by March 2010 this figure had risen to 7,268.

By gender, the division, as of the beginning of 2010, is as follows: 70,708 male inmates; 6,115 female inmates. The majority of prisoners, as stated above, are Spanish nationals, although their place of incarceration is often far from their home community. The incarceration of foreign nationals has also risen sharply in recent years. The largest groups are from Latin America, Northern Africa, and Eastern Europe.

Data from March 2010 show the distribution of prisoners throughout the autonomous communities: Andalucía (17,806); Cataluña (10,782); Madrid (10,647); and Valencia (8,239).⁹ Of these, 27,303 were foreign nationals (4,698 in Catalan facilities).

In general, the educational level of inmates is low. Illiteracy rates are as high as 13 percent, even though the majority of the offenders have attended primary school and completed an elementary education. School attendance in prison is not mandatory, but many inmates are motivated to begin studying for a new career while they are incarcerated. While many

start such studies, a large number do not complete them, for various reasons. The prisons also offer Spanish classes for nonnative speakers.

An analysis of data related to the participation of inmates in prison programs and activities shows a significant drop in participation in cultural programs over the last five years (41.1 percent in 2006, 40.6 percent in 2007, 37.25 percent in 2008, 33.94 percent in 2009, and 31.1 percent projected for 2010). Participation in educational programs is more stable (27.46 percent in 2006, 27.82 percent in 2007, 25.55 percent in 2008, 26.90 percent in 2009, and 25.44 percent projected for 2010). Educational programs include accredited primary and secondary level courses, and accredited post-secondary (university) courses, as well as and nonaccredited classes. Nonaccredited studies have shown the most growth in recent years, perhaps due to an increase in the demand for Spanish as a second language.

It is obvious that, whether or not they participate in the available education programs, incarcerated persons have a wide range of informational needs, which they try to meet not through the use of library resources, but rather by consulting with prison staff, family, or friends. They spend a large portion of their free time reading, but also watching TV and listening to the radio. Their reading is often accompanied by writing letters, contributing to the prison newspaper, completing assignments for classes, or engaging in creative writing projects. Inmates who read and write well enjoy a certain level of prestige within the prison environment. These individuals are also more likely to participate in cultural activities and to be employed as library assistants. They may also act as advisor to other inmates (Pérez, 2001). The inmate library assistants are vital to the daily operation of the library, and the value and appreciation of library services among the general inmate population is largely related to how these library assistants perform their job and how well they communicate with library patrons (Pérez, 2002).

LIBRARY SERVICES IN PRISON

So far we have discussed the importance of cooperation between various institutions and government entities for the success of library services in prison. The correctional institution commits to create a library, to provide the space and infrastructure, to assign operational staff, to develop policies and procedures, to maintain the library collection, to facilitate access to the library for all inmates, and to promote library use through related activities. We have also mentioned that the involvement of the Ministry of Culture and the regional governments of the autonomous communities is vital to the effectiveness and success of these libraries.

We have seen how the close association over many years between the library and the prison school has created a situation where, for all intents and purposes, the library functions primarily to support the school program.

This has impacted on the planning for and evaluation of these libraries, which have relied mainly on methods appropriate for school libraries. The concept that the prison library should function mainly as a public library—with the appropriate mission and roles—is a fairly recent development and an important issue currently being addressed by library experts.

Despite new guidelines from 2001 by the Ministry of the Interior for the reorganization of the Spanish library system as part of the Program for Library Organization and Management (Programa de Organización y Gestión de la Biblioteca),¹⁰ the main purpose of the prison libraries is still perceived to be support for educational programs and reading promotion, which is reflected in existing management policies and procedures. New management procedures are sorely needed, especially for the functions related to collection development, technical services, and the use of computer technology, including the GBwin version 2.4 software application.

In Cataluña, the MARC Instruction Program for Catalan Prison Libraries of January 2002 (Programa Marc de Biblioteques dels centres penitenciaris de Catalunya, enero 2002) was developed to standardize many aspects of the library operation, including services provided, hours of operation, technical services, and staff assignments. Today, every library in the Catalan prison system has its own professional librarian. The installation of “Millenium+Encore,” a new library management program, is expected in the near future. There is also an initiative to create a network of prison libraries in order to facilitate collaboration and workgroups.

Another issue of great urgency for prison libraries is the adoption of new technologies. Since 2006, the correctional facilities have had agreements with companies such as Red.es and groups such as Avanza Plan (Plan Avanz@) and the telecommunication center Puntos Ómnia in Cataluña.¹¹ Royal Decree 190/1996 (Decreto 190/1996) limits access to computers for inmates to locations and situations where they are supervised by a teacher or tutor, and to applications that are related to their education and rehabilitation needs. Internet access and the use of e-mail are also strictly regulated by internal management procedures, although this control system does allow for different levels of Internet access. Inmates are able to access the Internet in certain circumstances, but always under staff supervision.

As a result of these “openings,” some new technology related projects were initiated in 1997. That year the project “Communication without Borders Workshops” (“Taller de comunicació sin fronteras”) began. This project used the Internet for communication between inmates in Spanish and Argentine prisons as they collaborated on literary activities to promote cultural understanding and discussion. Many prisons have also converted their print newspapers to digital publications, and computer classes have become common in almost all correctional facilities.

As an innovative use of technology in prison, the project "Bloggers in Prison" is probably the most interesting. Established in Cataluña in 2006 and developed over several years, this project has won numerous awards and recommendations (Franganillo, et al. 2006; Burgos, et al. 2007). In collaboration with Puntos Ómnia centers, access to computer applications available in Cataluña is provided as well as training in their use and the creation of blogs. The young inmates create their own blogs after learning about legal and technical issues, such as freeware, copyleft licensing, Flickr, and YouTube. The participants also learn about appropriate self-expression, different communication styles, factual content, respect for others, and constructive criticism. The blogs are posted on the Web, and the inmates are able to receive comments and opinions from people on the outside, with whom they can then keep in contact.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years the provision of library services in Spanish prisons has improved considerably. We are, however, still far from achieving the level of professionalism recommended by Fabiani (1998). The fact that the library operates as an independent unit within the prison has contributed to the growing recognition of the value of its services, but the library will not be able to reach its full potential until it has a separate and dependable budget and professional library management staff who are capable of redefining the prison library's core roles and functions.

The steps taken so far to modify the prison library service model are positive, although work is still needed to completely disassociate the library from the prison education program so that user services can be provided similar to those of a public library. These services should include reference and information services, which are rarely available today. More staff training is also necessary (Comalat, 2010).

The existing collaboration agreements and/or conditions for participation in public library systems in the autonomous communities are not uniform or well defined. This prevents many institution libraries from taking advantage of the benefits offered by such arrangements, including access to a shared catalog and other online services. Many prison libraries still operate in relative isolation and only occasionally participate in projects or events proposed by the public library. More cooperation is needed in the areas of management and the delivery of service and especially in the area of network development.

Having a professional librarian available is vital for a successful operation. So far, however, librarian management positions have been established only at a few sites and then on a temporary basis. Only Cataluña employs professional librarians in all its prison facilities.

Librarians working in correctional facilities need special training pertinent to the prison environment, which is rarely available at this time.

Increased access to new technologies and the Internet is also needed for both library staff and patrons. In spite of legal and security related obstacles, some of the new projects involving technology and the Internet have been very successful and could serve as models for other prison sites. In order for all prison libraries to fully incorporate new technologies and electronic resources into their services and programs, current law must be changed to reflect the realities of modern library operation—even behind prison walls.

Finally, the prison library premises should be organized to facilitate social and cultural interaction; it should be an attractive and inviting meeting place, conducive to both intellectual and recreational pursuits.

Only with all these measures in place will the correctional libraries function effectively and in accordance with the requirements of the official operational model.

NOTES

1. For a more exhaustive understanding of this issue, consult the following regulations: General Prison Act of September 26, 1979 (Spain, 1979) and Royal Decree 190/1996 (Spain, 1996) that enact prison regulations to reform previous legislation of 1981. In addition to mandating library resources for inmates, these decrees also included new regulations on the areas of parole and probation.
2. In Spain the first agreements between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Culture date from 1986. Beginning with the regional directives of 1989, legislation was adopted, such as the Circular AP92-08, to regulate the operation of prison libraries and to develop reading programs in correctional facilities. The various ministries and local agencies adopted collaborative agreements, although the terms of such collaboration were not clearly defined.
3. For more information on this subject, see the following legislation: Spain (1999). This decree incorporates the instructional staff within the department of Basic General Education in Penitentiary Institutions into the General Corps of Teachers, while also providing operational standards for the education department of correctional facilities. See also Official State Bulletin (1999).
4. The *Inter-departmental Agreement for Collaboration* (2008) defines the collaboration between the Directorate General of Books, Archives and Libraries of the Ministry of Culture, and the Secretariat General of Penitentiary Institutions of the Ministry of the Interior with the stated purpose of extending the National Reading Campaign to inmates in Spanish prisons.
5. See Resolution of March 13, 2007 (Resolución de 13 de marzo de 2007) of the Technical Secretariat General. This document contains the collaboration agreement between the Cultural Council of the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha (Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha) and the Ministry of the Interior. The resolution calls for the development of cultural programs for incarcerated individuals in the correctional facilities of Castilla-La Mancha. See also the press release of the Department of Communication of the Aragón government (Gobierno de Aragón, 2010) regarding the agreement between the government of the Autonomous Community of Aragón (Regional Government of Aragón) and the national Secretariat General of Penitentiary Institutions to improve the prison libraries in the cities of Daroca, Teruel, and Zuera. (Convenio entre el Gobierno de Aragón e Instituciones Penitenciarias para mejorar las bibliotecas de los centros penitenciarios de Daroca, Teruel y Zuera.)
6. For more information, see the following legislation: Royal Decree 3482/83 of December 28 (Spain, 1983) on the transfer of prison administration and services from the national to the regional government. See also Royal Decree 131/86 of January 10 (Spain, 1986), which expands the scope of the prison administration assigned to the regional government.
7. Amendments to the Penal Code introduced by the Organic Law 15/2003 of November 25

- (la Ley Orgánica 15/2003, de 25 de noviembre) (Spain, 2003) and Royal Decree 515/2005 of May 6 (Spain, 2005) that establish criteria for alternative sentencing, such as community service and house arrest, while limiting the practice of institutional incarceration. See also Royal Decree 1181/2008 of July 11 (Spain, 2008), which outlines the basic structure of the Ministry of the Interior and creates the Secretariat General of Penitentiary Institutions to handle the growing size of Spanish prisons and to create alternatives to incarceration.
8. Information obtained from the Ministry of the Interior website, section on Statistical Data (La Gestión de Cifras; <http://www.mir.es/>)
 9. Information obtained from Program 133A: Correctional Facilities and Penitentiary Institutions (Programa 133A: Centros e instituciones penitenciarias; n.d.).
 10. For more information about the content of these Library Management Programs, see Instructions concerning criteria to follow in the preparation and development of correctional facility activities in the period of 2001/2002, prepared by the Independent Organization of Penitentiary Labor and Assistance [Organismo Autónomo Trabajo y Prestaciones Penitenciarias] I 8/2001 TP (2001) and I 9/1999 TP (1999); and the MARC Instruction Program for Catalan Prison Libraries of January 2002, prepared by the Directorat General of Prison Services and Rehabilitation of Catalonia (19–20).
 11. “Ómnia” sites are telecommunication centers administered by the regional government of Cataluña’s Department of Justice and the Foundation for Innovation in Social Action (Fundació Innovació per L’Acció Social, FIAS). These centers are located in Catalan prisons as part of the Ómnia Project and are equipped with computers with Internet connection that the prisoners can use under supervision.

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