

Information Needs and Reading Interests of Prisoners

Meri Bajić

J. J. Strossmayer University
L. Jaegera 9, Osijek, Croatia
mbajic@ffos.hr

Abstract

This master thesis focused on reading interest and information behavior of prisoners as a socially excluded group that faces complex and varied obstacles when accessing information and reading material. The study conducted as a part of the thesis sought to answer the following research questions: What are the information needs of prisoners? How do prisoners obtain the required information? What obstacles do they meet in that process? What are the prisoners' reading interests and habits? How do prisoners perceive and use prison libraries?

Data was collected by means of a questionnaire distributed to male and female inmates in six Croatian prisons across the country. The study provided rich data which can help the administration in Croatian prisons in their efforts to provide responsive library collections and information services.

Keywords: Reading interests, Information needs, Information-seeking behavior, Prisoners, Croatia

1 Introduction

Although universal rights of all individuals, including prisoners, to freedom of expression and freedom of access to information have been repeatedly

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asserted in several high-level international documents (Council of Europe, 1953; Council of Europe, 1987; United Nation, 1948; United Nations, 1955), in the body of library and information sciences (LIS) literature prisoners are traditionally recognized as a socially excluded group that has specific information needs and limited access to information. Although studies that focus on this social group are relatively rare in LIS literature due to complex safety regulations and strict rules that are applied in correctional institutions, several studies investigating Croatia's prison libraries and prisoners' reading habits have been conducted relatively recently (Horvat & Nebesny, 2004; De Villa, 2007; Šimunović, Faletar Tanacković & Badurina, 2015). These studies indicated that in Croatia's correctional institutions the provision of library and information services was inadequate and that prisoners have varied and mostly unmet needs for reading material. The most recent study (Šimunović, Faletar Tanacković & Badurina, 2015) concluded that it is extremely challenging to adhere to professional library values and practices in correctional institutions and that prison libraries in Croatia struggle with their basic mission of providing inmates with free access to information and responsive collections with diverse reading materials.

2 Study

Setting off from this knowledge base and aiming to contribute to it, the author tried to explore in more depth the information needs and information behavior of inmates in Croatia's prisons, to understand their reading interests and habits, and to learn about their attitudes and uses of prison library. The goal of the study was to understand the information worlds of inmates in Croatia's prisons and find answers for the following research questions: What are the information needs of prisoners? How do prisoners obtain the required information? What obstacles do they meet in that process? What are the prisoners' reading interests and habits? How do prisoners perceive and use prison libraries?

2.1 Methodology

In order to obtain answers to the above mentioned questions a quantitative study (survey) was launched from July through September 2014. Prior to sending out the questionnaires the written approval and support of the Central Office of Prison Administration at the Croatian Ministry of Justice was obtained. In the study the strict research ethics were observed. Questionnaire was selected as the best method for the collection of data in the security-sensitive environment. In order to obtain a representative sample of respondents the print questionnaires were sent to six prisons across country with different levels of security (maximum, medium, minimum). Due to financial restrictions it was decided that 30% of (male and female) population in selected prisons would be included in the study (random sample). As a result, a total of 620 questionnaires were distributed to selected correctional institutions. Eventually, 504 valid questionnaires were returned which makes a response rate of 81.3%.

Questionnaire consisted of 37 open and closed questions which could be grouped into five thematic sections: demographic data, information needs, information behavior, reading interests and habits, prison library use. The data was analyzed with the help of statistical software SPSS.

2.2 Results

The first section of the questionnaire focused on reading interests and habits of prisoners. The study found that reading books or newspapers was the favourite leisure activity for the majority of respondents (68.7%). This was closely followed by two additional leisure activities: watching TV/listening radio (66.5%) and taking part in sport activities (66.5%). The majority of respondents (36.7%) read between one and ten books in the last year. The subject analysis of concrete authors and titles the respondents read (N = 708) gives an insight into the respondents' favourite genres: crime fiction (18.9%), thrillers (13%) and historical novels (12.1%). However, when asked about the favourite type of reading material the largest proportion of the respondents indicated that they prefer to read newspapers (54%) and magazines (49.6%) over books. Respondents then elaborated on the type of the periodicals they like to read: daily/weekly newspapers on social and political life in the country and abroad, specialized magazines about health and sport, cars, famous people and their lives, pornography, computers etc. In an open ques-

tion, respondents indicated concrete authors and titles of books/newspapers/magazines that they would like to read.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents had to answer questions about their information needs and behavior. When asked about the information they need in their everyday life in prison, respondents indicated their interest in the wide array of different thematic areas (table 1).

Table 1. Information needs: thematic areas

Topic	absolute	%
Rights in the prison	284	56.3
Family	255	50.6
Life after prison	249	49.4
Employment	199	39.5
Prison rules	193	38.3
Sports and sports events	165	32.7
Life outside the prison	162	32.1
Finances	158	31.3
Health	151	30
Law, legal practice	146	29
Education and training	117	23.2
Current events in Croatia and abroad	109	21.6
My legal process	100	19.8
Culture and cultural events	94	18.7
Religion	82	16.3
Psychology	78	15.5
Famous persons (singers, actors, politicians etc.)	44	8.7
Other	29	5.8

When asked about the ways they obtain the needed information, the majority of respondents indicated that they obtain the required information from their family and friends (60.3%) and from the prison officers (57.9%). A total of 35.9% of the respondents ask other prisoners and 31.3% consult books/newspapers or ask their lawyer. Only 4.8% ask the prison librarian. The respondents were then asked about the barriers they face in accessing the required information. Although they indicated a wide array of obstacles, the

majority listed that their major problem was the fact that in the prison they did not have access to computers and the Internet.

In the last section of the questionnaire, the respondents described their attitudes and experiences with the prison library. 19.3% of the respondents do not visit the prison library at all and 14.8% use the prison library very rarely (several times a year). The majority of respondents 29.2% visit the prison library several times a month and 18.1% every day or several times a week. Most of them come to the prison library to borrow reading material (79.2%). A small proportion comes to watch TV (15.6%) or meet other inmates (11.7%). Respondents are relatively unsatisfied with the selection of reading material in the prison library. Respondents who do not use the library explained that their prison library does not purchase recent materials (newspapers or books) and that there is no access to the Internet.

3 Conclusion

Since the study covered many different aspects, due to spatial limitations, only selected findings could be presented here. The obtained data is highly valuable for prison administration because it offers a deeper insight into the information worlds of inmates and their estimate with regards to the success of the current prison library operations. It also provides concrete data about the types of information required by prisoners and the types of reading material preferred by the respondents. This can help prison administration in developing their library collections in financially difficult times when every penny needs to be spent carefully. By following the recommendations made in this thesis, the prison administration could develop responsive library collections and ensure that prisoners' information needs are fully met.

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