BEYOND WALLS

The prison reform movement is changing library services for incarcerated youth

ONCE A MONTH, librarians from the Boston Public Library system bring books to teens serving sentences in one of eight residential facilities operated by the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS).

The teens get to check out books, meet popular authors, and talk with the librarians about the hottest best sellers. Jessica Snow, the teen services team leader for the Central Boston Public Library, says that these visits are the only situations in which librarians don't want repeat customers.

"We do see a lot of the teens regularly, unfortunately," says Snow, who formed the library partnership with DYS about four years ago. "There's a significant amount of recidivism."

But judging by the comments written on feedback forms, Snow knows that the teens' interactions with library staff are something they value in an otherwise dismal period in their lives.

"I am thirsty to read, and they bring me books I like," wrote one student. "I appreciate the time that is made to read. It soothes my mental state of mind," said another.

When those teens come into their local branch after they have served their sentences, it is often because they got to know the librarians who visited them and recognize all that the library can provide.

"BUILDING TRUST WITH PEOPLE"

With juvenile justice reform on the agenda in Congress, attention to the types of educational opportunities available to youth in custody—including library services—is growing.

Bills proposed alongside the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2015 include legislation that would eliminate solitary confinement for juveniles, a bill that would create alternatives to incarceration, and another that would allow some criminal records of formerly incarcerated youth to be expunged.

Those proposals at the federal level reflect some of what is already taking place in New York City, where the Department of Correction has eliminated solitary confinement for 16- and 17-year-olds serving time on Rikers Island. The department has also limited to 12 the number of young men assigned to each of the 21 large living areas in the two juvenile facilities there—a change that has paved the way for the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) to expand its services to youth at Rikers. In each of those sleeping areas for 12 boys, a cell has been dedicated as a reading room. Staff members and interns from the library visit on Fridays to let the teens check out books and talk about what they're interested in reading.

"It's really about building trust with people," says Nicholas Higgins, the director of outreach services for the BPL system. "Our role is to be that community support, to be as regular as we can."

Higgins describes the visits to the facilities as being a little like "walking back in time." Electronic equipment, such as scanners for checking books in and out, is prohibited. The teens do not have Internet access, but Higgins has been asking that his staff be allowed to connect to specific websites related to job services.

BY LINDA JACOBSON

ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

MORE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology in corrections in general is also receiving increased attention since the release of a United States Department of Education report earlier this year (http://ow.ly/Sj64p). The report recommended that students have access to mobile devices, library ebooks, online courses, and other digital technology to support learning, as long as their online activity is carefully monitored.

"The primary concern about adopting educational technology in corrections is the potential for security breaches," the report says. "Other reasons include, but are not limited to, insufficient resources and staff capacity to purchase, implement, maintain, and monitor advanced technologies. Despite these legitimate concerns, a sea change is occurring in corrections."

The report highlighted the work of some "early implementers," such as the Oregon Youth Authority, where youth in custody can take online courses and earn both high school and college credit.

It also noted the work of the Consortium for Open Resources in Special Circumstances (nwspecialcircumstances.org), which advocates for the use of technology in

correction facilities and provides a list of programs and organizations working to expand online education services.

Camden Tadhg, the youth institutional libraries consultant for the Colorado State Library, has been able to bring e-readers—available only to the most well-behaved students—into two of Colorado's youth corrections facilities. While the directors of the centers are supportive, those who work on a daily basis with the students and the technology have been slower to accept the change. At two long-term facilities, teens have access to online databases for research, including EBSCO Information Services, a sign that the state is "slowly starting to implement ways for the kids to [engage in] 21st-century learning," Tadhg says.

Library services at Colorado's 10 facilities demonstrate the wide range of what is available to incarcerated teens—"from a supply closet full of books to something close to a fully operational school library," Tadhg says. The fact that juvenile justice systems operate differently from state to state is one reason why the services available to youth in custody also vary. Some, like Colorado's, are centralized at the state level, while counties have their own individual systems in other states. Library programs also largely depend on the staff time that facility directors are willing to give, Tadhg says. He adds that as with libraries in public schools, funding fluctuates for services to youth in custody.

THE "SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE"

Since 2000, the number of juveniles placed in correctional facilities has steadily declined. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), a division of the United States Department of Justice, 54,148 juveniles were housed in residential placement facilities in 2013, down from over 100,000 in 2000.

Still, the population of incarcerated youth is disproportionately black. For every 100,000 non-Hispanic black juveniles in the United States, according to OJJDP, 521 were in a placement facility, compared to 202 Hispanic and 112 white juveniles. In 17 states, four minority juveniles are placed in facilities for every one white juvenile.

Many advocacy groups say the roots of this imbalance begin in the very schools where students are supposed to be learning and gaining the skills to live successful lives and become responsible citizens. What has been labeled the "school-to-prison pipeline" refers to discipline and "zero tolerance" policies, beginning even in the early grades, in which certain infractions automatically lead to in-school or out-of-school suspensions or situations where law enforcement officers are called in to respond to school-related offenses.

"While there is no doubt that principals and administrators develop and implement such policies to create safe learning environments for the student body as a whole, the unintended consequences and disproportionate impact on some of our most at-risk children requires understanding factors that contribute to this trend, and strategies for taking a closer look at these policies," states a report (http://ow.ly/Sj6fr) from the American Institutes for Research (AIR).

Minority students and children with disabilities are more affected by such policies, statistics show. Mirroring the rates at which teens are placed in custody, black students are 3.5 times more likely than white students to end up expelled or suspended from school, according to research by the U.S. Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). These trends have led to complaints and OCR investigations, such as one launched this summer in the Salt Lake City School District. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, a school board member asked for an investigation into, among other things, whether school resource officers are assigned to schools based on their racial composition and whether students of color are assigned to a district alternative school more than white students.

Amy Cheney, who spent 15 years building up an on-site library program at the Juvenile Justice Center in Alameda County, CA, says she didn't think most of the teens she worked with should have been "locked up" in the first place.

The Camp Glenwood Book Club

By Lisa Rosenthal

ON TUESDAY NIGHTS, a small group of teenage boys incarcerated at Camp Glenwood gather in a circle for their weekly book club. The book club's leader, Kris Cannon (right), a retired high school librarian, asks "What do you think about this book?" The question is empowering, she says. "Where else does someone ask for their opinion and truly listen? The book club is a safe environment for them to express themselves." On any given week, the boys discuss books such as Jarvis Jay Masters's *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* (Padma, 1997), Matt de la Peña's *We Were Here* (Delacorte, 2009), or Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* (Grove, 2001)—true-life accounts of those who've been in trouble with the law. The camp is no sleep-away adventure, but a minimum-security court school facility for 25 boys nestled in a remote redwood forest in San Mateo County, south of San Francisco. Teenage boys convicted of crimes are assigned here by the county's juvenile justice system for an average of nine months to a year. They commit to participating in this educational and behavioral program aimed at turning their lives around. If they're successful, they're able to return to their regular high school.

Students are welcome to attend the book club so long as they follow Cannon's rules: show up consistently for six weeks, attempt to read at least some of the books the group chooses, show respect for one another during discussion, and refrain from side conversations. Cannon chooses the first book for each session and lets the students decide what to read next. Memoirs and biographies are most popular, and author appearances are common.

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Read the full story about Camp Glenwood: slj.com/CampGlenwood

Efforts have been launched across the country to implement restorative justice practices, which give students the chance to repair damage they've done in school settings instead of being removed or isolated. The AIR report also points to the need for educators to have ongoing professional development and opportunities to discuss ways to create more supportive and less punitive school climates.

"Professional learning communities (or communities of practice) are one of the most effective tools that principals and administrators can use to train staff on how to create safe, nurturing environments," the AIR report says. "Learning communities provide opportunities for staff to share experiences, practice new approaches to behavior problems, and engage in continuous dialogue about effective instructional practices."

Nick Franklin, coordinator of transitional services at Brooklyn Public Library, guides book clubs and discussions at youth detention facilities on Rikers Island.

BEYOND BOOKS

Still, the Alameda County program, called Write to Read, demonstrates how bringing books to incarcerated youth can lead to many other opportunities for the students to gain skills and improve their chances of leading productive lives when they leave the facility. Cheney also started a voter registration program, poetry writing workshops, and a successful college program for youth who already had their high school diplomas.

"These are kids who never thought they would go to college," says Cheney, who is now the district library manager for the Oakland Unified School District. "It's a culture shift—to come in a criminal and end up 'Wow, I'm a college student.'"

President Obama also recently announced that he would reinstate Pell grants for college for a limited number of prisoners, meaning that youth in custody can still have access to post-secondary education even before they are released. Some Republicans oppose the move, saying that it rewards bad behavior.

But Kris Cannon, a retired school librarian in California who works as a volunteer bringing books to a juvenile detention center in San Mateo County, CA, says the teens' behavior won't improve if they don't have opportunities to learn.

"You don't want to stunt their mental growth and development," she says. "We wouldn't stop feeding them, but by not providing them an education that's what we're doing—we're not feeding their minds, their souls."

In Boston, the librarians also participate in "re-entry panels," meetings in which representatives from various community organizations talk with the teens about services and opportunities available to them, including possible employment. In New York, four of BPL's branches provide videoconferencing services so the incarcerated teens can visit with their family members. This enables the family members to communicate more frequently than during the one in-person visit allowed per week.

"It's a way that we can actively make ties with the family," Higgins says.

DEVELOPING A "LOVE FOR READING"

Even with some facilities—like those in Colorado—beginning to allow e-readers, restrictions are still set on the types of materials allowed in juvenile detention centers. But Snow in Boston says that for the most part, the librarians are able to respond to the teens' requests—which are similar to those of most students their age.

"Whatever flies off the shelves in any urban library flies off the shelves at DYS," Snow says. Sister Soulja's works are always favorites, but so are nonfiction books about how to prepare for certain occupations.

Library Services for Youth in Custody (youthlibraries.org), a network and resource organization for librarians working with this population, provides book lists (http://ow.ly/SlZpu) that include titles likely to be more relevant to these teens, such as memoirs by those who have spent time in prison, stories on gang life, and books in the "high-interest, low-literacy" category.

The Boston librarians make sure the teens sign up for library cards if they don't already have them and inform them of events happening at the branches, such as resume workshops. Teens who are in the process of transitioning out of a placement will often receive a day pass to visit the library.

The partnership with the library is benefiting the teens in multiple ways, says Renée Heywood, a coordinator with Collaborative for Educational Services, which provides the education program for DYS youth.

"Many of them developed a love for reading through our own reading program, which was supplemented and supported by our partnership with [the Boston Public Library]," Heywood says. The teens have become "empowered" to request specific books, she adds. While touring the students' living quarters, "[I] saw at least one book in every room."

Snow aims for long-term empowerment. "A big part of what we do is serve as a bridge to when they leave [DYS]," she says. "Hopefully they see the library as a resource."

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