



Canadian Federation of Library Associations  
Fédération canadienne des associations de bibliothèques

# CFLA-FCAB Endorsement of the Prison Libraries Network's Position Statement on The Prisoners' Right to Read

Reviewed August 2024 in collaboration with the Prison Libraries Network

For incarcerated people inside Canadian correctional institutions, reading and access to information is a rare connection to the outside world.

It is also a basic right.

Incarcerated Canadians do not relinquish the rights and freedoms guaranteed to them under the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#). In fact, certain freedoms, such as those of conscience and religion, thought, belief, opinion, and expression have a heightened importance behind bars.

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB) [Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries](#) asserts that Canadians' right to access information is essential to be able to advance themselves through literacy, lifelong learning, social engagement, and cultural enrichment. Prison libraries play a fundamental role in guaranteeing rights, not only by providing incarcerated people with access to information about their legal rights as incarcerated persons, but also by providing the tools necessary to exercise these rights.

We call upon correctional institutions and prison libraries to actively promote literacy as a continuum of learning that assists and allows incarcerated individuals to develop knowledge and potential, to achieve goals, and to participate fully in wider society. This literacy, based on the concept of Intellectual Freedom, should include skills to access knowledge through technology, including the internet.

Prison libraries must be given the space necessary to provide access to collections and library programs that meet incarcerated people's recreational, cultural, educational, and other information needs. As supporters of intellectual freedom and access to information, prison



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libraries must provide people who are incarcerated with the widest variety of relevant and current materials possible, including access to legal materials. Materials should be provided in universally accessible formats, and/or libraries should have access to conversion technology in order to provide universally accessible formats. Collections and programming in prison libraries must also reflect the ethnic and cultural incarcerated population including people with disabilities. Library professionals are key to the prison library mandate including library staff dedicated to managing collections and delivering programs and services.

In addition, Canadian correctional institutions must acknowledge their key role within a social and political system of ongoing colonialism. Indigenous Peoples make up a percentage of the incarcerated population far higher than their proportion of Canada's general population – and the numbers of Indigenous Peoples who are incarcerated continues to grow. Within this context, and at the request of incarcerated Indigenous individuals, prison libraries have a responsibility to provide access to resources on Indigenous histories, cultures, and languages, to books by Indigenous authors, and to materials about the impacts – and related healing processes – of colonialism.

The *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* states that all prisons in Canada must provide a range of programs to assist in the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated people. In accordance, [Commissioner's Directive 720](#) of the Correctional Service of Canada stipulates that prisons have the responsibility to provide prisoners with access to library services. The Commissioner's Directive also states that federal institutions should have access to library services that are similar to those offered in the community. By fulfilling this objective, prison libraries – and their counterparts in the community – can contribute to safer and healthier communities. This highlights an important function of the prison library: to mirror the “outside” world and help prepare prisoners for release.

There is conclusive evidence of direct links between access to rehabilitative programs and lower rates of recidivism. When incarcerated people's information rights are respected, their ability to grow positive connections both inside and outside of the prison setting grows. This area of personal growth helps to prepare them for their release. Outside of prisons, all libraries in the community can play a critical role in supporting the successful reintegration of people who were formerly incarcerated.



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Correctional institutions are made better by the programs and information sharing opportunities that prison libraries provide. The vast majority of justice-involved people held in Canadian correctional facilities will be released back into our communities and have the ability to contribute to society as people with ideas, skills, and lived experiences. The provision of appropriate library services to inmates not only helps maintain basic rights, but also allows incarcerated people to explore their fullest potential.

While this statement references Commissioner Directive 720 governing federal institutions, the Prisoners' Right to Read is also applicable to provincial jurisdictional institutions.

This statement is supported by the [United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#) (the Nelson Mandela Rules) (2015), the IFLA/UNESCO [Public Library Manifesto](#) (2022) and the IFLA [Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners](#) (2023) as well as CFLA-FCAB's policies on intellectual freedom.