

Enclosed Spaces, Boundless Possibilities

Investigating the Status Quo of Romanian Prison Libraries through a Survey-based Approach

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The purpose of this study is to draw attention to the current state of Romanian prison libraries by focusing on such aspects as the legal framework under which they operate, their organization and facilities, the management of their collections and the policies employed to this end, the staff in charge of these structures, as well as library usage and satisfaction. Moreover, the present study aims to highlight the main obstacles and difficulties that Romanian prison libraries are struggling with at the moment, and to provide a few minimal recommendations for the improvement of their services and overall quality. In order to elicit relevant data, a questionnaire – comprising 48 both open and close-ended items – was designed and mailed to the 45 existing Romanian correctional facilities between early December 2021 and mid-January 2022. Albeit the response rate was 66.6%, the author has managed to identify a number of common issues that prevent Romanian prison libraries from functioning at an optimal level, such as the insufficient funding and inadequate space, the lack of professionally trained librarians, and the absence of a coherent collection development policy. Although those in charge of prison libraries strive to make the best of the available resources – and there are a few notable cases –, Romanian prison libraries are in dire need of both financial and managerial remodelling.

Keywords: *prison libraries, jails, prisoners, disadvantaged communities, education, Romania*

1. Introduction

The current situation of Romanian correctional libraries (i.e., libraries functioning within a correctional facility) represents somewhat of an uncharted territory – to the best of my knowledge, there have not been conducted any large-scale studies exploring the organization and the operations of these structures, which has led to an unfortunate disregard of their role as pivotal agents of change in the society. Concurrently, the existing body of research pertaining to international prison libraries is rather sparse; as observed by Garner (2021) in the introductory article that prefaces the 49th volume of *Advances in Librarianship*, a quick subject keyword search in *Library and Information Science Abstracts* reveals a mere number of 120 scholarly articles focused on prison librarianship which have been published between 1970 and 2020.

In spite of the disappointingly exiguous research output in the field of prison librarianship, the past ten years have been characterized by a newfound interest in the

functioning of these overlooked educational and cultural institutions, and academic journals such as *Library Trends* and *Advances in Librarianship* have contributed with very welcome collections of both illuminating and stimulating articles that highlight the technicalities of prison librarianship, as well as the challenges and achievements of these structures (Lehmann 2011, Garner 2021). Insofar as the scope of the current paper is not all-encompassing, and is limited to providing a broad outline of the library services available to the incarcerated population in Romania, I shall not review all of the issues raised by the above mentioned articles. The topic of prison librarianship has already been introduced to Romanian readers in another article, which has tackled such issues as the history of providing reading materials to people deprived of their freedom, the principles that govern the organization and functioning of prison libraries, their means of collaborating with public libraries and other cultural institutions, the roles of professionals working in this field and their accomplishments, and the multifarious obstacles faced by prison libraries globally (Babei 2021).

The aim of the present study is twofold: firstly, it seeks to shed light on the current situation of Romanian prison libraries through a survey-based approach (the main points of interest are their organization and management), and secondly, to identify aspects that can be improved upon and provide minimal recommendations for the betterment of library services oriented toward the prison population.

As evinced by Gorham et al. (2016), the roles of the contemporary library are ever-changing in a bid to remain relevant in a vertiginous dynamic society and to cater for the community's increasingly complex and kaleidoscopic needs. Rather than simply preserving and facilitating access to materials, libraries have been continuously expanding their social roles and reach in order to develop a sturdier interface between its services and its users: today, libraries are seen as pivotal community centres and guarantors of intellectual freedom wherein individuals are able to acquire and develop new skills, which are essential in finding employment, in becoming active members of their communities, and in thriving in a highly demanding society. Moreover, the authors posit that libraries ought to be regarded as institutions of human rights and social justice, functioning as great equalizers that bridge cultural, educational, social and informational gaps.

As promoters of equal access to information and equality of opportunities, it is the responsibility of libraries to ensure that their services can be accessed and fully taken advantage of by underserved communities, which generally are not even aware that they are entitled to such services. Šimunić et al. (2014) point out that one way in which libraries could visibly advocate for social justice is that of developing outreach programmes that meet the needs of disenfranchised populations, such as the incarcerated. Offenders constitute a rather heterogeneous group that, in addition to having been bereft of the ability to freely access libraries at any given moment, is characterized by a number of limitations that are deleterious to their well-being, and which further alienate them from their communities, such as low literacy levels and underdeveloped to non-existent professional skills, substance addiction, high levels of depression and self-destructive tendencies, coupled with a deficiency in life coping skills (Lehmann 2011). The responsibilities of a prison library thus go beyond securing access to information; it needs to ensure, first and foremost, that its patrons are provided with learning opportunities that can help them become autonomous and habitual library users. Furthermore, by actively engaging prisoners in cultural activities, libraries could highlight their role as agents that foster social change, inasmuch as it has been well established that offenders who visit the prison library and partake regularly in its cultural

programmes are less likely to reoffend once released (Bowe 2011). Consequently, in order to minimize the rate of recidivism and to exert a beneficial influence on society as a whole, a well-functioning democracy should prioritize the development of attractive and appropriately equipped correctional libraries, able to function at professional standards comparable to their public counterparts.

In Romania, the legal framework within which prison libraries operate (Ministry of Justice 2011) requires that every penitentiary set up a library stocked with an adequate amount of materials for inmates to access. Each correctional facility – based on its level of security and a host of other internal factors – may decide whether the access to the library’s collections will be open (meaning that the convicts are allowed to browse the library shelves freely and peruse the documents inside a dedicated space inside the library) or indirect (mediated by the librarian, who delivers the requested documents to the individual cells). Regarding collection development, the regulations specify various acquisition modes: new documents can be purchased either by the National Administration of Penitentiaries (the governmental body responsible with coordinating the activity of the Romanian penitentiary system) or by the penitentiaries themselves; in addition, documents can be acquired through transfers, sponsorships and donations from individuals or institutions. Concerning the prison staff in charge of the library, the regulations for correctional libraries do not require them to undergo professional librarian training; usually, it is the prison educator who manages the library activities, who is sometimes assisted by inmate workers. The staff in charge of the library keeps track of the borrowed items either electronically or by means of individual physical records, and inmates are expected to cover the costs of damaged or lost documents. Finally, Romanian legislation mentions that prison libraries might establish cooperation with public libraries and other cultural or artistic institutions.

2. Methodology

Data for the present study was obtained through a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches; specifically, a Google Forms questionnaire comprising a total of 48 both open-ended and close-ended items was sent via e-mail to the 45 correctional facilities that make up the Romanian penitentiary system. Prior to administering the questionnaire, permission to initiate the study was requested from the National Administration of Penitentiaries, which approved of my endeavour and stated that the conditions for participating in this study will be established individually by each penitentiary.

As of 12 February 2022, there are a total number of 23026 inmates housed across the 45 correctional institutions: 16 of those are closed or maximum security facilities, while 19 others are characterized by semi-open and open security regimes. Additionally, there are two juvenile detention centres, two educational centres, and six prison hospitals. Each correctional facility was contacted in early December 2021 and asked to participate in the study by forwarding the enclosed questionnaire to the person in charge with managing the prison library.

The survey was aimed at eliciting data about the following aspects: general information in regard to the prison library (square footage, location, working hours, funding, staff training, security measures, cooperation with other institutions, facilities), collection management and provision of library services (collection size and content, types of available catalogues, collection management tools, bibliographic classification and shelving arrangement,

collection development policy, programming), and library use (usage and circulation statistics, form of access to the collections, library regulations, staff and user satisfaction). The questionnaire also enables responders to indicate aspects of the library that, in their opinion, warrant improvement and to point out any additional details that the questionnaire may have omitted or insufficiently covered.

3. Results and analysis

As is often times expected with large-scale surveys involving numerous participants and a wide array of questionnaire items, the response rate is seldom 100%; out of the 45 correctional facilities which were contacted in early December 2021, only 30 of them agreed to be part of the study and proceeded to complete the questionnaire. Consequently, the return rate was 66.6%, which is a bit lower than envisaged, but not low enough to render the results inconsequential.

3.1. Library location, staff and funding

Except for one of the respondents (a prison hospital, which unfortunately did not reveal whether or not there are plans to address this shortfall in the future), all of the other participants indicated that their penitentiary institutions do indeed provide library services to their inmates. When it comes to the location of the library within the institution, 17 respondents (58.6%) answered that the libraries are accommodated in stand-alone areas, whereas nine respondents (31%) specified that the library is housed in the same area as the correctional classroom or the prison learning club. Moreover, three respondents (10.3%) stated that the library collection is stored in a locked repository, which can be accessed only by the person in charge of the library. Regarding the physical space of Romanian prison libraries, only 14 participants provided the square footage and the values vary considerably: the lowest value was 9 m², whereas the highest one was 100 m². In five prisons, the space allotted to the library was between 12 and 20 m²; in seven prisons, between 25 and 50 m², and in four prisons, between 56 and 100 m².

With respect to the professional qualifications of the prison library staff, the results reveal that, on the whole, prison libraries are not managed by trained librarians (more specifically, they do not have a university degree in library and information science). Only 27 participants chose to answer the question that inquired about their studies, and the overwhelming majority of them (96.5%) responded that they have no formal librarian training; only one of the respondents specified that they have such a qualification, but details whether they possess a university diploma in this field have not been provided. Based on the results, it would appear that library activities in prisons are mostly delegated to correctional officers or to jail educators (it should also be pointed out that only two respondents mentioned that they tend the prison library full-time, whereas the others revealed the managing the library is but one of their responsibilities), albeit certain penitentiary institutions allow inmates to engage actively in library work. In this regard, 23 out of 29 penitentiaries (79.3%) provide opportunities for inmates to assist the library staff in various tasks, such as organizing the library resources, assisting patrons in checking out books, maintaining library records up to date, ensuring cleanliness of the facility, restoring damaged books, offering recommendations and providing guidance to patrons in locating the desired document, organizing certain activities within the library, and running the prison magazine. However, it should be emphasized that, according to IFLA's guidelines for library services to the

incarcerated (2005 p. 9), having a degree in library and information science or completing a professional training program in the field of librarianship is a prerequisite for managing prison libraries. Although one might imagine that coordinating the activities within a prison library is an intuitive process, in actual practice it requires an excellent command of current library science standards and an awareness of the latest trends in this field, coupled with a fine mastery of all library activities (from receiving a document and classifying it to putting it into circulation and keeping track of it) and an intricate understanding of the library user's multifaceted information needs.

Perhaps one of the most disappointing findings yielded by the questionnaire is that, as a rule, Romanian penitentiaries do not support their libraries through regular financial provision – the participants (89.6%) who chose to answer the question related to the funding models of their respective institution indicated that, presently, the prison libraries they oversee do not benefit from annual allocations and that they are left out of the institution's financial planning. Such an unfortunate situation may be regarded as one of the major obstructions that prevent prison libraries from truly blossoming: a serviceable library is one whose collections are constantly updated in order to cater for all of its patrons' needs and to maintain its appeal, and the absence of regular annual allocations perpetuate the regrettable status of prison libraries as ancillary structures.

3.2. Library collections – management, structure, development

When inquired about the means through which the initial library collections were put together, most respondents (51.7%) replied that they primarily relied on donations from individuals and institutions, which could suggest that the overall quality of the collections was not quite adequate to begin with, since donations is often employed as an umbrella term for discarded books and other documents that are no longer desired by the previous owners either due to their poor condition, or to their outdated content. In the same vein, donations represent the prevailing mode of collection development – 86.2% of the respondents indicated that their libraries continue to rely on donations for developing their collections. Of note is that as many as 31% of the respondents claimed that they have not established a donation policy, and that they accept donations without prior scrutiny (i.e., analysing the books in terms of physical condition and relevance), a practice which further promotes inconsistent and unattractive collections.

Other practices employed by prison libraries in constituting the initial collection of materials include: acquisitions made by the prison administration via subventions or own revenue (13.8%), acquisitions made by the National Administration of Penitentiaries via subventions or own revenue (13.8%), inter-institutional transfer (6.9%), or all of the aforementioned modes (10.2%). Regarding the preferred means of collection development, the second most popular acquisition mode is inter-institutional transfer of documents (34.5%), followed by acquisitions either by the prison administration (24.1%) or the National Administration of Penitentiaries (24.1%). Regrettably, one of the respondents specified that, at present, the library does not have enough room to support collection development. Another participant stressed that the prison library is a branch of the local county library, and that the collection is developed according to the public library's policies. In view of the prison libraries' reliance on donations and inter-institutional transfers as preferred modes of collection development, it could be surmised that the collections have a rather uneven quality and that they possibly encompass a large number of obsolete books.

The above-mentioned hypothesis is further supported by the respondents' attitude towards applying selection criteria in their collection development policy. Quite a few participants (22.2%) admitted to not applying any selection criteria when purchasing documents or accepting donations, which is highly detrimental to maintaining an attractive and coherently organized library collection. On a more optimistic note, the majority of participants (66.7%) cited the artistic, social and scientific value of the document as the paramount selection criterion, followed by the accessibility of the content (40.7%), the inmates' specific book requests (40.7%), the inmates' education level (40.7%), the expenses (18.5%), and the ethnic structure of the prison population (18.5%). The fact that such criteria are taken into account suggest that the collection development policy is not wholly arbitrary, and that the prison library staff strives to circumvent the limitations imposed by a lack of funding (and thus a lack of freedom in tailoring the collections according to patrons' particular information needs) by ensuring that the acquired documents, notwithstanding their obsolescence, are still able to satisfy a heterogeneous prison population. Additionally, in spite of a rather common tendency to accept all donations regardless of the document's condition or content (a habit which can perhaps be ascribed to the staff's desire to enrich the deficient existing collections through every possible means), there are still prison libraries that cite the following reasons in declining donations or rejecting patrons' purchase requests: dated content (31%), poor condition (31%), the existence of multiple copies of the same document (31%), inappropriate content (13.8%), and insufficient storage (3.4%).

Concerning the size of Romanian prison library collections, the information provided by the respondents varies significantly, although in the majority of cases the collections encompass more than 1000 materials. Only one respondent indicated that the size of the collection is wholly unsatisfactory (300 documents). Collection size ranges from 300 to 23.000 materials, and based on the answers provided by 24 respondents, the average collection size amounts to 7.700 items. On account of the fact that I did not have access to data concerning inmate population size in individual penitentiary institutions, no conclusions could be made regarding the number of books per capita (the IFLA recommendations state that there should be at least ten titles per inmate or a collection of at least 2000 items). However, considering the fact that only four participants responded that their library collections contain less than 2000 titles, it can be said that, in general, IFLA's specifications about collection size are met.

Regarding the various forms of literature that can be found in prison libraries collections, fiction is by far the most popular (100%), closely preceded by religious and educational literature (both 96.6%). Other common types of reading materials include: dictionaries (75.9%), legal literature (75.9%), albums and atlases (65.5%), self-help literature (65.5%), encyclopedias (62.1%). It is interesting to point out that in four prison libraries (13.8%), inmates have access to comics and graphic novels, which can be regarded as an attractive way of stimulating reading among prisoners, who are often confronted with low literacy levels. Concurrently, the fact that legal literature is readily available in most prison libraries ought to be commended since it allows inmates to gain better insight into the legal implications of their actions and it also empowers them to defend their rights should they ever feel that they have been misrepresented or mistreated. Another merit of the library collections in Romanian prison is the fact that some of them include titles in languages other than Romanian: in 12 prisons (41.3%), inmates have access to documents in such languages as Hungarian, English, French, German, Arabic, Russian, Hebrew, Italian and Spanish. This is particularly important because, as stressed by the IFLA, the library collection should be

equipped to meet the needs of a culturally diverse penitentiary population (2005 p. 12). In addition to books, 19 prison libraries (65.5%) provide access to periodical literature (newspapers and magazines), with an average of four available subscriptions. Finally, it should be pointed out that, in all but one penitentiary, inmates are allowed to purchase reading materials for themselves; thus, in instances when the prison library collection is unable to fulfil prisoner's information needs, they are given the freedom to purchase the desired books or to subscribe personally to various newspapers or magazines.

As far as non-print library items are concerned, it is encouraging to learn that some prison libraries have chosen to complement their collections of reading materials with a host of audio, visual and non-book materials able to enhance patrons' general library experience. In this regard, the collections of 13 prison libraries (44.8%) incorporate the following alternatives to printed books: CDs and DVDs (61.9%), audio books (14.3%), and board games (14.3%). However, inmates with physical disabilities seem to be neglected when it comes to library services: only one respondent (3.4%) indicated that their library collection includes specific materials aimed at those who cannot use conventional print publications, such as books in Braille format. In spite of a lack of data concerning the total number of inmates with various physical disabilities within the Romanian prison system, the dismaying unavailability of materials suitable for such prisoners ought to be addressed as quickly as possible in order to ensure that all patrons, irrespective of their disabilities, have equal access to information and rehabilitation programs.

With regard to collection development, participants were asked to indicate how often they proceed to expand the collection with new materials, and also how often they evaluate the collection so as to select obsolete or damaged books for the weeding process. The vast majority of respondents (57.1%) revealed that collections are enriched sometime between one and five years, whereas four respondents (14.3%) answered that they expand the collection once a year, and another four respondents (14.3%) specified that they do so every five year or at intervals longer than five years. The remaining four respondents (14.3%) all emphasized that collections are broadened irregularly, particularly when the allocated funds enable them to or whenever they receive a significant number of donations. There was also one respondent among the aforementioned four who stressed that collections are expanded according to patrons' requests.

Concerning the weeding of no longer suitable or relevant library resources, the results of the questionnaire suggest that the collection development process in prison libraries is biased toward expanding the size of the collection and preserving the existing materials at all costs, often to the detriment of ensuring a satisfying overall quality by discarding certain obsolete or damaged materials. Given the already scant collections of many of these libraries, it is understandable why there is a prevailing tendency to amass a great number of library items and to encourage book restoration in favour of eliminating deteriorated resources, although the limited physical space of prison libraries should prompt the staff to make use of the available space judiciously. Most respondents (35.7%) pointed out that their library undergoes weeding sometime between one and five years or at intervals longer than five years (25%). Only six out of 28 participants (21.4%) responded that they usually inspect their collections and discard irrelevant or damaged materials at least once a year, whereas four respondents (14.3%) specified that they never remove resources from their collections. Finally, one respondent (3.6%) stressed that weeding is not conducted systematically, but rather only when materials are irreversibly damaged.

When asked about the preferred means of processing the library items, the responses revealed that a physical inventory register is the most commonly employed instrument of monitoring the collections (86.2%), sometimes alongside with a document movement register (24.1%), similarly to those found in public libraries. Some prison libraries prefer to keep track of their collections digitally (e.g., through lists elaborated using MS Word or Excel), whereas a minority of prison libraries make use of traditional library cards (6.8%). Patrons can learn about their library collections through a variety of catalogues, the most common one being the alphabetic catalogue (50%). Other types of catalogues currently employed by prison libraries include systematic/classified catalogues (7.7%, wherein items are arranged according to the systematic subdivision of subjects), subject catalogues (3.8%), and chronological catalogues (3.8%). Surprisingly, three respondents (11.5%) specified that their libraries employ online catalogues, akin to the OPACs typically found in public libraries, albeit it is difficult to assess whether their understanding of online catalogues is congruous with the term used in library and information science, since I could not personally access and examine them. Additionally, some prison libraries do not have a physical catalogue and have developed lists with the available documents for patrons to borrow in MS Excel or Word (30.8%). Finally, there are also prison libraries which have no catalogues whatsoever (11.4%), where prisoners have to browse the library shelves individually in search of particular titles.

3.3 Library usage and circulation

With regard to library usage, I first attempted to identify the percentage of inmates currently subscribed to their penitentiary institution's library, and subsequently to gather data about the number of active library users (i.e., patrons who use library services on a regular basis). Unfortunately, despite explicitly asked to do so, some participants did not provide data about their patrons as percentages, which makes it difficult to gain an accurate understanding about their users' reading habits, especially since I also did not have access to data about the total number of inmates in each penitentiary. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the results reveal that, on the whole, the total number of inmates subscribed to their respective prison library is disappointingly low: 17 out of 28 respondents (60.7%) pointed out that less than half of the actual prison population is subscribed to the library, and in some prisons the number of inmates subscribed to the library makes up a mere 1% or 4% of the total prison population. As far as the active library users are concerned, the situation does not seem very reassuring either: 21 out of 28 participants (75%) indicated that less than half of all inmates subscribed to the library's services actively borrow documents and partake in various activities organized by the library.

On average, prison libraries are open 20 hours a week (based on the responses provided by 27 participants), although in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, some prisons have reduced the number of open library hours. It should be emphasized that in a large number of penitentiaries there are no areas specifically designed for in-house use: 10 out of 29 respondents (34.5%) specified that inmates are limited to reading the loaned materials in their individual cells. However, in most cases (41.4%) inmates are able to use library resources both in their cells and on the library premises. In other instances (20.7%), current security measures forbid inmates from setting foot on the library premises, and as a result the staff in charge of the library deliver the requested documents to inmates' cells. Interestingly, in one penitentiary (3.4%), prisoners are not able to check out library resources and read them in their respective cells; they can read books only within the library premises. Finally, the results reveal that most of the Romanian prison libraries included in the survey (82.1%)

enable inmates to browse the library shelves personally (in other words, open access to library collections is preferred), rather than having a staff member seek the requested documents for them (which is preferred in the remaining 17.9% of libraries). The fact that the vast majority of prison libraries provide open access to prisoners is encouraging, insofar as this can be regarded as a highly effective means of arousing patrons' intellectual curiosity and of aiding them in becoming autonomous library users.

The circulation policies of Romanian prison libraries are quite lax, especially when compared to public or academic libraries: although in most cases (51.7%) prisoners are allowed to check out up to three books at the same time for a loan period of 14 days (58.6%), which is similar to the guidelines typically employed by most public libraries, in a large percentage of prison libraries (27.6%) inmates are entitled to borrow more than three books simultaneously, which they can keep for more than 14 days (31%). Contrastingly, there are also prison libraries where patrons are able to check out only two books (10.3%) or even one (10.3%), and the loan periods are restricted to one week (10.3%).

3.4 Library services and equipment

One of the most surprising aspects revealed by the survey is the richness of cultural programmes available to prisoners within the library: apart from five respondents, the remaining participants indicated that inmates have access to a wealth of cultural, educational and rehabilitation activities inside the prison library. These programmes include such activities as basic literacy classes, book review and debate clubs, conferences, film projections, general knowledge contests, arts and crafts workshops, artistic activities during holidays and celebrations, theatre plays, and even various online activities. Furthermore, most of the respondents (72.4%) indicated that the prison they work in edits a literary magazine to which inmates are actively encouraged to contribute, which is a great opportunity for prisoners to showcase their talent and to spend their time constructively. However, as noted by two respondents, such activities do not fall within the scope of the prison library; rather, they are carried out inside the rehabilitation department by educators, psychologists and social workers.

Another positive aspect of Romanian prison libraries is the fact that most of them are stocked with technical equipment meant to enhance patrons' experience and to transform them into multifunctional spaces. The following equipment can be found in most prison libraries: PCs (74.1%), projectors (40.7%), television (37%), radio (25.9%), telephone (22.2%), musical instruments (18.5%), and printers (14.8%). It should be pointed out that two (7.4%) prison libraries also provide Internet access for their users, which is very surprising since lack of Internet access is one of the most prevalent deficits in prison libraries all around the world given the security risks associated with Internet use by inmates (Lehmann 2011). One of the respondents (3.7%), however, made it clear that their prison has implemented its own intranet network, rather than enabling access to Internet, which is a solution that could prevent security breaches.

3.5. Prison library cooperation with other libraries and institutions

When inquired about their relationship with the local public libraries, the participants indicated that cultural and educational activities organized in partnership with the public

library is the most common form of cooperation (51.7%). Donations of discarded library materials (34.5%) and sometimes of brand new resources (24.1%) are other means through which the local public library can have a positive impact on the prison library, together with establishing an ILL scheme, which is available in eight (27.6%) of the prison libraries included in this study. It is rather disappointing that only three (10.3%) prison libraries benefit from methodological guidance from their public counterparts; considering the lack of specialized prison librarians, such professional guidance would definitely have a positive outcome when it comes to improving the management of library collections and services. Even more dismaying is the absence of any form whatsoever of cooperation with the public libraries in nine (31%) of the 29 prison libraries that have agreed to take part in the present study.

Another issue highlighted by the respondents is the lack of cooperation with other prison libraries: 17 out of 26 participants pointed out that their library is not part of a professional network, and this isolation can be seen as having deleterious effects on the prison library's management. In view of the present unavailability of professional standards for prison librarians at a national level, and given the fact that prison librarianship is not recognized as a stand-alone line of employment, staff in charge of the prison library might often feel overwhelmed or unqualified to address prisoners' informational, recreational or educational pursuits, especially when the public library does not provide professional guidance. The development of a professional network aimed at bringing together employees managing prison libraries would then be a sensible step in improving prison library services by exchanging know-how and by elaborating specific professional guidelines. Only two respondents (7.7%) mentioned that they formerly participated in exchange programmes with other prison librarians, and other three participants (11.5%) responded that they have conducted certain cultural activities in cooperation with their peers from distinct prisons. Moreover, five respondents (19.2%) specified that ILL is the sole form of collaboration with other prison libraries. Finally, participants were asked whether they have established any protocols of cooperation with national or international non-profit organizations (NPOs), and only ten respondents (34.48%) indicated that their prison libraries benefit from such forms of cooperation with national entities. Most of these collaborations involve book donations, cultural, sporting and rehabilitation activities, and also activities revolving around religious education.

3.6. Library satisfaction

The concluding section of the questionnaire sought to elicit information about library experience and overall user and staff satisfaction, and the results suggest that there is a general consensus about the need for Romanian prison libraries to undergo a thorough revamping process. Participants were asked to express their satisfaction with the current condition of their prison library on a scale from one (totally unsatisfied) to five (very satisfied), and only five out of 29 respondents (17.2%) indicated that they are wholly contented with the present state of affairs. Eleven participants (37.9%) confessed to being only somewhat pleased of the library they work in, whereas eleven others (37.9%) revealed that the existing conditions are not quite satisfactory. Additionally, two respondents (6.9%) acknowledged that their libraries are downright lacking in adequate conditions.

As shown by the results, user satisfaction is, unfortunately, rarely evaluated – 18 out of 25 respondents (72%) revealed that they have never assessed whether patrons are pleased

with the library's collections and services. However, the very few who have evaluated user satisfaction and have assessed prisoners' information needs throughout the time have employed such instruments as interviews (24%), questionnaires (8%), and a respondent indicated that they rely on patrons' verbal feedback (4%). Moreover, the fact that only a few respondents consistently make use of strategic documents required for the proper management of the library and its collections may constitute one of the reasons as to why most of the participants feel rather disappointed with the current conditions. The most common strategic documents found in prison libraries are: library rules and regulations (66.7%), annual reports (55.6%), donation policy (25.9%), and collection development policy (11.1%). The lack of a more widespread use of the latter two, in particular, is quite problematic, given that they are essential in guaranteeing an adequately stocked and properly maintained library collection.

Participants were also given the opportunity to highlight the aspects that, in their opinion, demand immediate attention and improvement. With the sole exception of a respondent, who claimed that everything is currently up to par, all the other 24 respondents agreed that their library would greatly benefit from the following improvements: a more numerous and diverse library collection, a larger library and storage space, the digitization of library collections and the implementation of library management software, the addition of technical equipment, the setting up of an in-house reading location, more reading promotion campaigns, and the hiring of professionally trained prison librarians.

4. Conclusion

The present study is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to attempt to provide an overview of the current state of Romanian prison libraries, and in so doing, it hopes to raise awareness about the difficulties these structures are confronted with and to serve as an impetus for further and more complex research. Although only 30 out of the 45 existing Romanian correctional facilities agreed to participate in the survey, the results should be able to paint a relatively clear picture of the general trends surrounding prison library management and use. Also, it should be noted that the results are not peculiar to Romania, and that they rather reflect a common situation found in prison libraries across the globe, as identified by other researchers (Lehmann 2011, Garner 2021).

In spite of the fact that a legal framework for the provision of library services to the inmate population exists in Romania, a cursory glance through the current regulations reveal that these are not sufficient for the development of successful prison libraries. The results of the study point to a fundamentally uneven development of the present prison libraries, and this lack of standardization could also be the result of the almost non-existent cooperation between these structures. Although generally heterogeneous when it comes to the make-up of their collections and the specific cultural activities conducted within the library, what these libraries do have in common are mostly their impediments, such as the insufficient funding (or absence thereof), the inadequate space, and the unavailability of professionally trained personnel, which indicates that, on the whole, the international guidelines for prison libraries are not met.

The issues underscored in the previous section should be seen, however, as part of a larger, systemic problem which comprises political, economic, social and educational strands. As long as governments are not sufficiently aware of the social and economic benefits associated with setting up and maintaining modern prison libraries, their current state of

affairs is unlikely to change. Thus, one of the first steps in the improvement of library services within correctional facilities is, as stressed by Šimunić et al. (2014), to advocate prison librarianship and to counteract the widespread status of prison libraries as peripheral to the penal institution. Governments should acknowledge that such libraries play an important role in preventing recidivism and in successfully rehabilitating prisoners, and consequently aid the prison administration in ensuring that the libraries are adequately funded and that they have enough space to conduct their operations at an optimal level. Furthermore, it is essential that these libraries be run by professional prison librarians, who should be able to enrol in dedicated academic programs or accredited training programs. Moreover, in addition to the development of a professional network of prison librarians that encourages the exchange of expertise and experience, public libraries should be prompted to establish strong relationships with their correctional counterparts and to provide professional guidance, as well as to help them with donations and various cultural and educational programs. Ultimately, albeit the development of a rich and diverse library collection is an important goal, prison librarians should strive first and foremost to attract patrons and to instil a habit of actively using the library and make the most of its resources and services by organizing a wide range of attractive activities, tailored to their individual needs.

When appropriately managed, prison libraries could become places of boundless possibilities (be them educational, recreational or therapeutic), and many Romanian prison libraries ought to be commended for their determination to not only survive, but to address prisoners' various pursuits in spite of the rather hostile work conditions and meagre resources. Since – with a few negligible exceptions – the staff in charge of the prison library does not work full-time as librarians, and is required to perform a host of distinct duties, their dedication to ensure that the library is as operative as possible (and the numerous cultural activities hosted within the library, together with the efforts devoted to maintaining the collections stand testimony to their commitment) is all the more noteworthy and should prompt the decision makers to pave the road towards fully supporting these agents of social change.

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