



## **Information needs, accessibility and utilization in prison library context of Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigated information needs of prison inmates, accessibility and utilization of library and information resources in the prison library context in Sri Lanka. Survey method was adopted for the study while a structured questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. One hundred (100) were used as sample size for the study from the total population of Magazine Prison in Sri Lanka. The simple random sampling technique was adopted for this study. Data collected were analyzed descriptively. The respondents were asked questions on the information resources and services in prisons, access to information resources and services, utilization of information resources and services, satisfaction with information resources and services and information needs of inmates. The data were presented in frequency tables and percentages. The findings revealed that the information resources and services were made available to inmates. It was discovered that one and only available information resource is books and available information service was lending. However, the study revealed that not all of these resources and services were fully utilized by inmates. The study also revealed that inmates all have information needs which are to be met through the provision of information resources.

**Keywords:** accessibility, information needs, information resources, information services, prison library, Sri Lanka, utilization information resources

### **1. Introduction**

Information is the heart of the world development (Tamiyes&Aiyepelu, 2000) [27]. Accurate, relevant and current information has been a significant precursor to technological innovations. Information is an essential need that enables an individual or organization to function, flourish and take decisions. From time immemorial, mankind has employed information as a tool in the search for solutions to problems that he has come to grapple with.

Information, according to International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA, 2001), is very important in the development of an individual and of the society. Thus, acquiring and using information are both important activities. Information has become a primary strategic resource that is transforming the lives of many in the world today. The flow of information has made the world today a global village and we are said to be in the information age. This new age is a revolutionary period whose impact is far surpassing that of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions.

Prisoners, like free people, need information for different purposes. The provision of information for the prison population cannot be described as a straight drawn line as some critics wonder why a person incarcerated for committing a crime should be granted right to information. Nevertheless, it is important to note that prison inmates are members of the society who also yearn for information and as such have the right to information just as every other citizen.

According to Dike (2002) [13], often the offenders' disadvantaged educational and socio-economic status may lead them into a life of crime. Subsequently, the prisoners need literacy training, educational and vocational programs to better equip them for a productive life. Prisoners have been seen to have the same reading interests and

information needs as other people. But with a good number of them having low educational skills, they often experience difficulties in meeting their information needs (Shirley 2006) [25].

Libraries as major custodians of information, which have been professionally processed and stored for retrieval should play positive roles in every segment of society. Anafulu (1998) posits that the library is the engine room and power house where information is collected, stored, processed and retrieved for use. A library as a body of collected information brought together for the purpose of knowledge dissemination and utilization should be a central clinic for all (Ibegwam, 2003). Prison as a reformatory institution and inmates being members of the larger community should of right be exposed to information and knowledge for educational and training purposes, person development as well as study kits and do-it-yourself tools.

The values and missions of the modern practice of criminal justice, in which emphasis has gradually shifted from punishment towards education and rehabilitation, go hand in hand with a view of libraries as important players within the intellectual freedom and social justice agenda. Within this enlightened correctional paradigm, prison libraries serve as a window and a link to the outside world and represent a safe and humane environment that provides support for educational, recreational and rehabilitative programs (Lehmann and Locke, 2005, 4 p) [19].

Today peoples live in a rapidly changing world. It is also the responsibility of the books to take those changes to the people. In 1933, Hitler was removed from all libraries of Jewish, Catholic, Marxist and books written by anti-fascist writers in Germany. Prior to his power, popular books and scrolls among German people were burned presences of public. Not only was it compelled to remove the books and documents that are not suitable for the political vision of

some state rulers, but also some librarians were subjected to various pressures. Therefore, it can be noted that not only the modern state rulers but also the past rulers in the past world believe that libraries can have a profound effect on society. In each of these areas, the practice of reading humanity can be described as a hidden treatment for many social issues.

Sri Lanka is still a developing Asian country, reconvicted rate is 44.7% and the Recidivist (person who has been admitted to prison on more than two occasions) rate is 30.7% (Prisons Statistics Sri Lanka, 2018). Most of the prisoners have low educational attainment (Dike 2002) [13] and poor employability skills, as revealed by IFLA (2005), so they have need for further education and vocational training programmes and informative materials to help them find useful occupations after release. However, it has been observed that prisoners in Sri Lanka often times do not receive the library and information services they require. Lack of provision for the information needs of the prisoners may result in lack of rehabilitation, re-socialization, re-adaptation and overall transformation of the prisoners to become better citizens of the society (Shirley, 2003).

In order to overcome this problematic situation in particular, directing new and young criminals to reading books in prison is a more effective procedure; but it has not yet been properly implemented in Sri Lanka. Libraries not only assist the prisons, to maintain discipline but also provide remedy against the idle mind and make the prisoners friendly and co-operative. Therefore the library is an educational as well recreational agency for the prisoners (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012; Australian Library and Information Association, 2015; Conrad, 2012) [13, 14, 18]. The library services in the prisons are a vital force in the reformation of the prison inmates. It aims at the re-socialization of inmates with an ultimate purpose of preparing them for their return to society with a more wholesome attitude towards living and with a desire to conduct them as good, honest and law abiding citizens.

It has been revealed that most prison libraries in Sri Lanka lack the adequate provision of library information materials/resources for inmates. Rehabilitation of inmates is further impaired when they cannot gain easy access to the few available library information materials and utilize the same to solve their information problems. This unfortunate situation has caused inmates constant challenges on how to survive and be integrated into society as better citizens. Therefore the study was investigated information needs of prison inmates, accessibility and utilization of library and information resources in the prison library context in Sri Lanka.

**Method**

This research was carried out to investigate the “Information needs, Accessibility and Utilization of Information Resources and Services to Prison Inmates in Sri Lanka”. To achieve the objectives of the study, five research questions were formulated and answered. Survey method was adopted for the study while a structured questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. The study was carried out in the Welikada prison (also known as the Magazine Prison) and it is the maximum security prison and is the largest prison in Sri Lanka. According to the data from the prison statistics report in 2018, at present, there was a total of about 121,869 prisoners in all prison institutions in Sri

Lanka. Among them, there were total of about 8868 prisoners in the Magazine prison. Using simple random sampling technique, selected hundred prisoners (100) as the sample of the study. Data collected were analyzed descriptively and data were presented in frequency tables and percentages.

**Research Questions**

- What are the various information needs of the prisoners?
- What are the library and information resources and services available for prisoners in the prisons libraries?
- To what extent are the prisoners’ information needs being met?
- What are the problems provisions of library and information resources to meet the prisoners’ information needs?
- What are the strategies that could be used to enhance the provision of library and information resources and services to meet the prisoners’ information needs?

**Results**

**Socio-Economics and Demographic characteristics of prisoners**

The finding show that majority of the respondents (80%) were Sinhala, while 8.8%, 6.3% and 5% were Tamil, Muslim and Cristian respectively. The result that most respondents were Sinhala is likely because the Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group in the Sri Lanka and also occupy all the divisions in the Colombo district. Other ethnicity groups were represented small proportions of the tested sample. The age distribution of respondents showed that the majority (41.3%) of convicted prisoners were aged between 40-50 years. A major question the study sought to find answer to was the educational background of literate prisoners. This was to be able to find out how their educational levels influence their information needs and use. The educational qualifications of prisoners were also captured in table 01.

**Table 1:** Education Level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	G10 or below	16	20.0	20.0	20.0
	O/L	32	40.0	40.0	60.0
	A/L	27	33.8	33.8	93.8
	Graduate	4	5.0	5.0	98.8
	Masters	1	1.3	1.2	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

**Various Information needs of the prisoners**

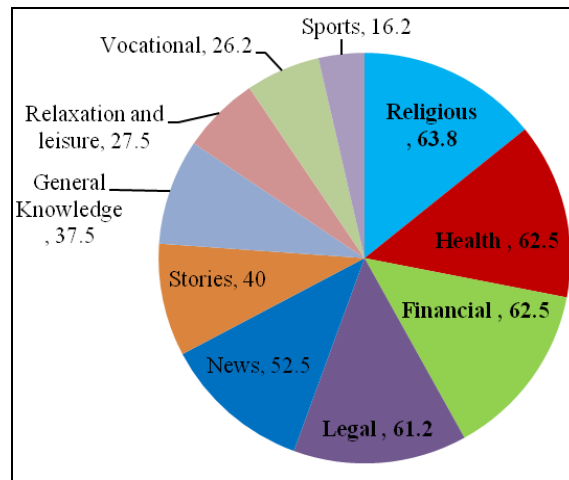
The result shows that all the listed information needs are highly needed by the prisoners as they all obtained mean scores of above criterion mean ( $x \geq 3$ ) representing “Very Highly needed”. More specifically, areas such as health, legal, religious, financial and news are highly needed with means above the 4.00 weighted averages. Even other areas such as vocational training, recreational, stories and general knowledge information with lower means scores compared to the weighted average are also very highly needed with high mean scores. Prisoners were not interested to sport related information and results were indicated lowest mean rating of 2.98.

**Table 2:** Information needs of prisoners

	Legal	Religious	Health	Vocational	Recreation	Financial	General Knowledge	Sports	Stories	News
N Valid	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.5	4.375	4.55	3.9	3.6125	4.3625	3.8875	2.9875	3.7125	4.15
Mode	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	5

Indicate using a 5-point scale of very highly needed, highly needed, needed, not needed, very highly not needed, areas where the prisoners need information. According to the indicated modes of the results, most of the prisoners' answer were "Very Highly Need" option for religious (63.8%),

health (62.5%), financial (62.5%), legal (61.2%), news (52.5%), stories (40%) and general knowledge (37.5%). It shows, prisoners had very high needed of information in these seven categories and it is shown respectively in figure 01.



**Fig 1:** Scales of information needs by prisoners.

**Library and information resources and services available for prisoners in the prisons libraries**

The prison also has library collections in different areas and of different type fiction, non-fiction. However it is also evident that they are lacking in their library collections. It could be seen that Welikada prison library has 3335 book

titles only. The prison does not even have materials on certain subject areas at all. The few available ones are outdated books donated by individuals or public libraries a long time ago. Prison authorities did not acquire newspapers and magazines due to security reasons.

**Table 3:** Available information resources in the prison

	Resources	Quantity
1	Accommodation – reading tables/chairs	NA
2	Qualified library staff/workers	NA
3	Reading Materials	
	I. Fictions – story books/novels	1650
	II. Science fictions	50
4	III. Other fictions	400
	Non – fiction books like books on subjects like	
	I. Religion or religious books	1100
	II. Languages	0
	III. History	20
	IV. Science and Technology	10
	V. Reference books like encyclopedias and dictionaries	5
	VI. Social sciences like books on business	30
VII. Biography and related books	70	
5	VIII. Textbooks written in subjects e.g. Mathematics, Agriculture etc.	0
	Magazines and Newspapers	
	I. Science magazines	0
	II. General weekly/daily magazine and newspapers	0
	III. Local magazines	0
	IV. Foreign publications	0
6	V. Business magazines or newspapers	0
	VI. Recreational magazines or newspapers like sports	0
7	Materials on law and legal matters	0
8	Audio recordings	0
	Video recordings	0

In providing reading materials for the prisoners, the library lends books to the prisoners and allowed to borrow books to their cells. Prisoners indicated that they needed to be borrowing books to read at their convenience.

**To what extent are the prisoners’ information needs being met**

The results indicated that prisoners’ religious and relaxation information needs are being met to a high extent. This they said is due to information services, programmes and reading materials provided by religious bodies and groups that come visiting the prisoners. Their educational, health and vocational information needs are provided for and met but

to a moderate extent. Their educational and financial information needs are provided for and met to a low extent. Prisoners also agreed that their information needs were all being satisfied to a low extent due to lack of adequate library and information resources.

**The problems provisions of library and information resources to meet the prisoners’ information needs**

Questionnaire was the main instrument used to get data to answer this research question although during group discussion, the opinions of the prisoners were sought over the visualized problematic factors. The responses of the prisoners are presented in table 04.

**Table 4:** problems provisions of library and information resources

	N			
	Valid	Missing	Mean	Mode
The uncomfortable nature of the prison	5	0	5	5
Prison policies and laws that restrict certain reading materials	5	0	3.6	3
Staffing problems – inadequate number of qualified library staff to help the prisoners and lack of training for available workers	5	0	3.6	3
Poor funding of the library and the prison as a whole	5	0	5	5
Little time allowed prisoners for interaction with outside information providers	5	0	3.6	3
The building used for library and reading accommodation	5	0	5	5
Poor connections with public libraries and other library professional bodies	5	0	3.6	3

It was indicated from the above table that all the items have mean rating of 3.6 - 5.0 The problems of meeting of the prisoners’ information needs to a high extent with uncomfortable nature of the prison, poor funding of the library and prison and inadequate accommodation for the library rating highest (5) being to a very high extent. Prison policies, staffing problems, little time allowed for use of information resources and services and poor connections with public libraries and other library professional bodies all hinder the provision of library and information resources and services to meet the prisoners’ information needs.

Tight schedule in the prison, uncomfortable nature of the prison and inadequate accommodation for the library were cited as common factors that hinder the meeting of their information needs.

**Strategies that could be used to enhance the provision of library and information resources and services to meet the prisoners’ information needs**

Prisoners’ responses were presented in table 5 below. Their responses were taken note of and qualitatively presented.

**Table 5:** Strategies to enhance the provision of library and information resources

	N			
	Valid	Missing	Mean	Mode
Connecting with public libraries, NGOs and others like religious bodies and legal practitioners	5	0	3.6	3
Connecting with professional bodies like library associations and stakeholders	5	0	3.4	3
Purchasing of reading materials by the prison authorities	5	0	4.4	3
Allowing more access to library materials	5	0	3.8	4
Mapping out time for the prisoners to use the library and other information resources	5	0	3.6	3
Developing new and using existing guidelines to prison library service accommodation	5	0	3.8	3
Allowing more information flow from other sources like religious groups	5	0	3.6	3

Results indicated that purchasing of reading materials by the prison authorities will help enhance such provisions to a very high extent – thus a mean rating of 4.40. Other ways are allowing more access to library materials and developing new and using existing guidelines to prison library service accommodation with mean ratings of 3.8 each. They indicated that connecting with public libraries, NGOs and others like religious bodies and legal practitioners, allowing more information flow from other sources like religious groups and mapping out time for the prisoners to use the library and other information resources will help enhance such provisions to a high extent – thus a

mean rating of 3.6 each. They went further to emphasize the need for the government to be sensitized on the information needs of the prisoners so they might provide the needed materials for them. Almost all the groups in the prison remarked that the government should direct more attention to making the prison conditions better than their present pitiable states.

Renovating the prisons to reduce overcrowding and improving on the status of the pre-colonial cells will help in making the prison environment a little more conducive for accessing and utilizing information resources when provided. Also they suggested the need for the authorities to

work towards the prisoners' reformation by avoiding censorship, possibly allowing the prisoners to access internet and make use of newspapers, magazines and the like.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The prisoners needed spiritual information to change for the better both spiritually and emotionally. For instance, they need reading resources on religious matters like the holy books and also stories about and the biographies of great people that lived exemplary lives like the saints. Such materials will help to enlighten them more on how to redirect their lives in areas where they have been lacking and change for the better emotionally and spiritually.

Likewise, the prisoners agreed that they had very high need for information for health purposes. They explained they needed health information to be able to keep up with hygienic measures like maintaining neatness, body cleanliness, care in using sharp objects and other tools to prevent wounds. These would help them avoid contracting diseases common with the prison environment diarrhea, dysentery and even malnutrition. They especially need this information because inadequate health facilities standard hospital facility, drugs and general healthcare are provided for them.

Furthermore, the study indicated that the prisoners have high need for financial information to enable them source money for use in the prison as well as after release. Some of the prisoners engage in jobs outside the prison to generate money, according to the specifications of the prison authorities. Some others took the need to be need for money to be used even as they are still in prison.

All the questioners expressed having a very high need for legal information. Further enquiries showed that such information would enable them to know their fundamental human rights, even as prisoners. Legal information could enhance due process in the trial of those awaiting trial and hasten processes of their trial or release, as the case may be.

In Welikada prison, many of the prisoners indicated having high need for and special interest in recreational reading like novels about adventure and fantasies which can help them overcome their boredom in the prison. The prisoners said that having adequate and varieties of recreational reading materials will definitely help them to learn on their own, improve their communication ability and cope with loneliness and boredom. This was the case in all of the prisons.

As a developing country, the Sri Lankan prison library system still exists in a backward level. Although many prisons have small libraries, they are informal and elementary. There were two libraries in the Welikada prison. Worn with use, the book in the prisoner's hands is being read for the eighth time. Once a shabby corner with few books on a small shelf, the Welikada Prison Library renovated last July 2017, now has cupboards, tables and chairs with more than 5000 books of different genres. However, there is a long way to go to create the Model Library planned by the Special Committee on Prison Library Services.

The prison does not even have materials on certain subject areas at all. The few available ones are outdated books donated by individuals or public libraries a long time ago. The Public Library, Colombo is giving 500 titles of books at a time to the Welikada prison library for specific periods.

When after finished that time period those books should be returned and can be getting new titles from the public library. Among those books, most of the titles were novels or religious. It is evident that these libraries do not have adequate information resources to provide for the prisoners' information needs.

Most of the prisoners do make use of the library and information resources and services all the time that such resources and services are provided. Majority of the prisoners indicated this and always said that engaging themselves with using information resources gives a feeling of the outside world in addition to helping them meet up their various information needs. Such prisoners make use of information resources, as they said, when in certain mood or state of mind. The prisoners sorrowed on tight schedule and lack of enough reading and information materials as well as any library or reading programmes. Not only are adequate information resources and services not provided, but also that there is little or no time allowed for using or enjoying such resources and services / programmes. Such tight schedules, they said, were being caused by prison routines like working in both outside and inside the prison compound.

### Recommendations

Prisoners have the same fundamental right to reading and access to information which should not be denied. The prison library is in the best position to provide the library and information resources and services for the prisoners to meet their information needs. Prison library service is a neglected area in Sri Lanka which needs more attention, resources and planned development. Though there are thousands of inmates in prisons in Sri Lanka from all strata of society, providing them with quality library and information services is still a distant dream. The main purpose of these institutions is to rehabilitate the people and send them back to society for which the importance of quality library services is invaluable.

Therefore, in the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are being made.

- A mechanism should be put in place for the provision of effective library information services for Sri Lankan prisoners. This should be based on a comprehensive information need analysis of prisoners required in the peculiar environment. Barriers such as location of facilities, this is encompassing, poor lighting, noise that affect accessibility of library resources by prisoners need to be addressed so that there can be effective utilization.
- Additional prison libraries to boost information services for prisoners need to be established in other prison locations across the country. This would help to support prisoners with their quick reference information, recreation, legal aid information and enhance their rehabilitation as well as make them better informed citizens.
- The extended services of the state and public libraries should be integrated in prison libraries through periodic lending services.
- There is need urgent policy measure to addressing the perennial problem in Sri Lankan prisons for the effective provision of information services.
- A simulated internet service should be set up in prison libraries for prisoners to get acquainted with the vast

current materials which act as tool for information generation. The services of professional librarians would be needed in this area, which will then source for these resources on behalf of the prisoners.

- The prison authorities should map out time for the prisoners to consult library and information resources and services as part of the prison's daily schedule of activities. Guidelines to prison library services in Sri Lanka should be developed by the Prison Service in collaboration with Library Association and stakeholders.

The relevance of information to the prisoners in prison has been justified in various studies. It is believed that information need of prisoners is indeed critical for the daily survival of prisoners, even more so than it is for the free citizens living in the outside world. Campbell (2005)<sup>[11]</sup> has stated that prisoners need information to stabilize fear and seclusion. It is interesting that the result of the analysis shows that the generality of the prisoners know that they require information and have a clear understanding of materials needed in order to meet the information needs and thus improve their rehabilitation.

This result is in agreement with Dike (2002)<sup>[13]</sup> and Campbell (2006) who have stated that the prison library is the only alternative place where inmates can exercise their right to information because of the peculiar environment they find themselves once shut off from the outside world.

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