



Information while Incarcerated: The Manitoba Experience

Submitted by:
Kirsten Wurmman, Librarian
Manitoba Library Association
Manitoba Law Library
kirsten.w@mla.mb.ca

The Prison Libraries Committee (PLC)

- Started in 2012 as a committee of the Manitoba Library Association in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
 - our first library space was at the Winnipeg Remand Centre (To be in remand refers to individuals being held in custody while awaiting a court appearance or sentencing. 77% of incarcerated Manitobans are in remand.)
 - by 2025, PLC has created some sort of library or library program/service in each of the 6 provincial prisons and the one youth centre.
- The work is all done by volunteers:
 - library workers, library supporters, library students, library lovers
- The committee relies on fundraising, donations from the public and local libraries, and the collaboration with community partners.
- We believe library workers and libraries contribute to social justice in our communities and that access to information is a human right.
- Our initiative works to create a humanising space where everyday knowledge, experiences, and literacies are valued. This involves providing access to information, to books, to a library space where incarcerated individuals can feel included in and knowledgeable about the community, the world, and the justice process.



Volunteers sort through donations from the public, from publishers, and through our wishlists found at local bookstores. These books are all sorted, vetted, and shelved in our storage space for distribution.



Volunteers pack up thousands of books every year for 6 provincial adult prisons, and one youth centre.

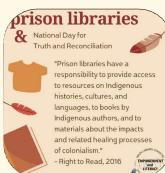
The Facts

- Not all prisons have libraries, and in fact most do not.
- While Canadian federal prisons are legally required to have libraries, most provincial prisons (including Manitoba) have no legal requirement.
- Crime severity index dropped 4% in 2024 and yet Manitoba consistently has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the country.
- As a direct result of colonialism, systemic discrimination, and racism, incarcerated Manitobans are a disproportionately racialized group with an overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples.
- Indigenous People in Manitoba make up:
 - 18.1% of the general population
 - 77% of the adult and 84% of the youth prison population
- In 2020/2021 Indigenous Peoples in Canada were incarcerated at rate **8.9 times higher** than non-Indigenous peoples.
- There is no internet in any prisons in Canada - neither provincially nor federally.
- Challenges exist with arbitrary censorship, a lack of guidelines or policies regarding books and library spaces, and a disconnect between librarianship values and rules of the carceral institutions.
- The information poverty environment and low literacy level in prisons disadvantage individuals navigating the complexities of an information-driven society. Prisons fail to offer access to the necessary information, legal and otherwise, needed to understand and solve problems.



The Advocacy

It is our responsibility to learn and unlearn about the history and culture of our patrons.
We take time to listen to community and to meet folks where they are at.
We value creating relationships in a meaningful and good way.



Writing (in collaboration) the "Prisoner's Right to Read" statement - adopted in 2016 and updated in 2024 by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations.

Advocating with the provincial government to create a library (and library staff) policy for all prisons in Manitoba.



Scan QR code to read the *Prisoner's Right to Read* statement

We uphold the *Truth and Reconciliation* Calls to Action, and the *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* Calls for Justice. We incorporate these Calls into all the work we do and the interactions we have with our patrons and community.



Scan QR code for the *Truth and Reconciliation* Commission of Canada

The Projects

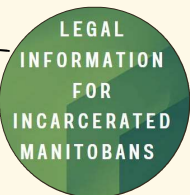
The **Legal Information for Incarcerated Manitobans** ensures that all provincial prisons in Manitoba now have access to legal information, in accessible formats.

Legal information is often difficult to find or access but everyone should have the right to justice. This initiative provides resources and information for those that have been incarcerated and are looking for assistance dealing with criminal, family, employment and other law issues.

The project has built a collection, is publishing a graphic novel, offering in-person legal presentations to prisons, and creating FAQs and much more.



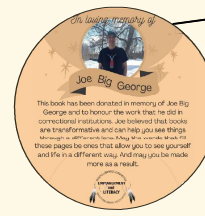
Scan QR code for more information about the *Legal Information* collection.



Volunteers arrange for programming like: writing circles, art builds, poetry and hip hop programs, bookclubs legal presentations, and comic workshops. We've even published a chapbook (cover art above).



Volunteers go into adult and youth correctional centres monthly for Book Exchanges and Pop-up libraries to help community members who are incarcerated find the books they need.



The **Joe Big George Indigenous Collection** was created because of the lack of Indigenous resources and books in the prisons (despite the overrepresentation of incarcerated Indigenous peoples.)

Joe Big George was an Elder in federal and provincial prisons and passed away in 2023. Joe was passionate about ensuring people have access to resources that will help them learn about their identity. While serving his own time in prison, Joe was a voracious reader and often spoke about how books created a space for him to learn and grow.

With the help and support of Joe's family and community, this collection is being delivered to all provincial prisons.



Scan QR code for more information about the *Joe Big George Indigenous* collection.

The Collaborations

Bar None Winnipeg: Prison Visiting Ridershare

Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba: supporting the needs of women involved with the justice system

Government of Manitoba -Department of Justice: Corrections and Custody

Inawendiwin/The Connection Project: a student-led project to build an Indigenous library space - for youth, by youth

John Howard Society of Winnipeg: working with individuals in conflict with the law - before, during, and after incarceration.

Law Society of Manitoba

Manitoba Library Association

Native Clan Organization: Manitou House

University of Manitoba Legal Clinics

And so many more!

