

The Australian Prison Foundation – Why did it start and what will it do?

The Australian Prison Foundation is a non profit organisation dedicated to providing assistance to those touched by prisons in Australia. We are interested in the following areas:

- supporting and assisting research into Australian prisons,
- providing information and support to prisoners, prisoners families, and people working in the corrections field
- forming partnerships of support with other prison groups

We seek to create:

- a database of prison support organisations and individuals
- a library of research and information
- links between communities and prisons

The idea for this national organisation came about after I completed my research into prisoner learning in September 2009. When I was conducting my research I used the internet a lot to see what other organizations were doing in other parts of the world and I realized that in Australia there was no national organization focused solely on prisons and prisoner issues. I decided that we could do with one and modeled this organisation loosely around the Prison Reform Trust in the UK. I spoke with Bruce Townsend who I met during my research, Greg Barns and the guys at Justice Action in NSW. Of course a couple of sticky issues were raised in these initial conversations – things like the possibility that other organizations may resist another newcomer, the fact that I was a newcomer in this field and the fact that we didn't have any money or funding! These things only time will tell – but what I have found so far is that other organizations have been wonderfully supportive, I have gathered a board of people who have a wealth of experience, unfortunately however I haven't won the power ball or met a wealthy philanthropist, so the funding is still a bit of an enigma!

We have spent time building a website with resources for prisoners, their families and other organizations to use – if you have information resources that you would like to add to our site or your organisation would like to put their details on our website please let me know, there are forms located at the registration desk. When my brother went to prison getting information about things was often difficult. Unfortunately we found that different staff members would provide conflicting information and what was a 'rule' one day was not the next, making it confusing and difficult.

We have also this year organized this low cost conference which has been supported by Deakin University and the Reintegration Puzzle. We are planning on this being an annual event which will travel around the states to provide opportunities for organizations and communities to be involved across the nation.

Since last year we have run a competition to create slogans for posters promoting prison library services and the benefits of reading. Our aim is to create and print posters for distribution within prisons around Australia and this will be our first big expense as an organisation. We have also started to create a national prisoner book program with one prison agreeing to allow books to be provided to them and our first shipment of two boxes of books was sent this week. In the US there are many prisoner book programs operating and I have been in touch with a number of them about how they run their

programs. Some have agreements with corrections services to provide books for their libraries and educational centres, others provide books to prisoners who send in letters requesting particular topics, authors or books. Providing books to prisoners they say opens minds and provides a way to foster literacy. In many countries there is little philosophical commitment from the general public and little government support for providing prisoners with more than the bare minimum of services. In many countries, the idea of offering education, rehabilitation, and meaningful employment is still not widely accepted, let alone the concept that prisoners have rights, not only to decent and humane treatment, but also to read and to freely access information! Resistance to these approaches may exist for political, philosophical, or economic reasons – even though it is a well known fact that education and rehabilitation of prisoners prevents recidivism and saves taxpayers money in the long run.

In my research I discovered that, for those lucky enough to be able to access a library, prisoners enjoy the tranquility and normalcy found there. For many prisoners the library is an oasis. Learning resources are highly valued including access to law books, access to resources that are meaningful and relevant, books to support art and drawing lessons and other personal interests. Library books on these subjects are highly sought after by prisoners. The prison librarian put together a collection of love poems for use by other prisoners as these books were so popular that the library could not keep up with demand. Similarly books with pictures were highly sought after for tracing. The library is cited as a place for accessing information and sparking new interests, as well as pursuing answers (Hughes, 2004). Prisoners value teaching others including teaching skills to others that will help them gain employment, having access to resources to assist other prisoners learn and being involved in peer education programs. Some examples mentioned include taking non English speaking prisoners to the library to assist with reading and English skills, prisoners submitting ideas to the prison system to support these areas and the desire of prisoners to run classes to train others in these skills.

Literacy and education are keys to opportunity in this society, and perhaps no one realizes this more clearly than prisoners. In a US research project on prisoner literacy a prisoner in a maximum security prison reflected on the importance of learning and literacy in this way. “When I first came [to prison] I had a negative attitude. I didn’t write. I didn’t want to go to school. I didn’t think it mattered.” His views were changed, however, by another prisoner who was involved in postsecondary education. “He tried to show me how education would help me inside, even more than in the eyes of someone else,” this prisoner said. His life in prison changed once he began to take classes. “It made me feel good about myself and gave me hope as to what I could be.” For many people, going to prison provides them with an opportunity to read which would be denied them in their outside worlds. I have watched my brother go from not being interested in reading to being an avid reader since his experience in prison. My son, currently in prison, is also reading and also pursuing education, something that he never did on the outside.

So why should literacy and education in prison be important to the community? There are many benefits in providing these resources to prisoners, research has shown for example:

A United States study concluded that a ten-percentage point rise in the rate of high school graduation would cut the murder (arrest) rate by between 14 and 17% and a one-percentage point increase in the graduation rate would lead to a reduction in crime of between 34 000 and 68 000 offences, with a social benefit of between US\$0.9 billion to US\$1.9 billion.

A United Kingdom study found that a 10% rise in the average pay of those on low pay in an area reduces the overall property crime rate by between 0.7% and 1.0%, estimated to provide a benefit between £1.3 and £1.8 billion in an average year over the period 1975–96.

There is evidence of a link between learning, wage effects and the reduction of crime. Feinstein (2002) examined the relation between year-to-year changes in wages and the crime rate using the area data of the United Kingdom study above. Estimated financial savings in regard to property crime, if 1% of the working-age population who had no (or low) qualifications were to achieve one O level, are of the order of between £10 and £320 million per year.

Evidence from Canada (Porporino & Robinson 1992 cited in Feinstein 2002) supports the importance of basic education in reducing recidivism. The provision of employment opportunities for people leaving prison is one of the most effective means of reducing recidivism and reducing crime. Poor literacy and numeracy make it less likely that people leaving prison will find employment.

There are also benefits for staff working in prisons and for other prisoners, for example, A study of 371 US prisons concludes, 'even after controlling for other institutional characteristics, prisons, in which a large number of the inmate population was involved in educational, vocational and prison industry programs, reported lower rates of violence against inmates and staff', and that 'order was best promoted when prisoners were involved in meaningful programs offering opportunities for self-improvement and not just structure and 'keep busy' assignments' (McCorkle et al, 1995:325).

A US study on prisoner literacy states that prisoners who reported reading any material frequently demonstrate higher literacy proficiencies than prisoners who reported reading less than once a week.

So how can you help us provide books to prisoners? We are seeking organizations who are interested in:

- donating books
- being a collection point for books in your local community

and of course if you have cash lying around, help with postage would be great!! Any support would be great and if you or your organisation would like to be involved please speak with me.