

EVALUATING THE NEEDS & NECESSITY OF BOOKS TO PRISONERS

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OVERVIEW

The budgets of prison libraries have been reduced drastically in the past decades, despite growing prison populations and the publicized mental, social, and economic benefits of books in prisons^[1]. One Seattle-based non-profit, Books to Prisoners, has mailed free books to prisoners across the United States since 1973.

Books to Prisoners currently receives 1,000 to 1,200 letters each month from prisoners and faces a six-month backlog of requests and chronic shortages of highly requested materials^[2].

For the first time in the organization's history, this project quantified incoming book donations and prisoner requests with the goal of seeking targeted donations.

PROCEDURE

1. Sample incoming book donations ($n = 464$) & prisoner letters ($n = 230$)
2. Select most popular tag from an online book review site^[3] to assign each book & prisoner request to one of 47 genres (multiple requests in some letters)
3. Calculate service gaps using difference in % between donations & requests; cluster popular request combinations
4. Research book publishers & distributors; write & send donation letters; report results



BOOKS TO PRISONERS

HOW CAN BOOKS HELP PRISONERS?

Skills

Career and educational development

- Business and finance
- Dictionaries

Self-help and expression

- Fitness and nutrition
- Religion and spirituality

Escapism

- Fantasy and magical realism
- Romance and chick-lit

Cultural knowledge

- Politics, history, and economics
- Anthropology and sociology

SELECTED RESULTS

Genre	Gap (%)	Sample Donor
Horror	16.34	Apex Publications
Dictionaries	14.14	Merriam-Webster
Thrillers	12.23	Thomas & Mercer

A CLOSER LOOK

Multiple correspondence analysis :
Popular genre request combinations mapped three clusters of genres

Log-odds test:
Statistically significant negative odds for requesting anything from "skills" if "escapism" was requested, and vice versa, suggesting targeted purposes for book requests

IMPACT

In addition to potential book donations received from donation letters, this new quantitative data provided the organization with powerful tools for future fundraising.

These resources will benefit the organization, prisoners, and communities into which prisoners return.

