**Reading Behind Bars: Results of a Study into Reading Interests and Library Use of Prisoners in Croatian Correctional Facilities**

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**Abstract**

The paper presents findings from a study into reading interests and habits of prisoners in six Croatian penitentiaries, and their perception and use of prison libraries. The study was conducted with the help of self-adiministered print survey. A total of 30% of prison population (male and female) in selected prisons was included in the study and a total of 504 valid questionnaires were returned (response rate of 81.3%). Findings indicate that reading is the respondents' most popular leisure activity and that they read more now than before coming to prison. Respondents read more fiction than non-fiction. Most frequently they read crime novels, thrillers, and historical novels. To a lesser degree they read religious literature, biographies, spiritual novels, social problem novels, self-help, war novels, science fiction, erotic novels, romances, spy novels and horrors. Respondents would like to read daily newspapers and magazines, and books about sport, health, travel, computers, hobbies, cookbooks etc. Respondents have wide reading interests (both in relation to fiction and non-fiction) but they do not have access to them in their prison library. Respondents reported that reading makes their life in prison easier and their time in prison passes faster with books. Only about a quarter of respondents are satisfied with their prison library collection. Almost a fifth of respondents does not visit the library at all because it does not have anything they would like to find there: newspapers, modern literature, non-fiction, reading material for visually impaired and computers.

**Key words:** reading interests, reading habits, prisoners, prison libraries, Croatia

**Introduction**

Access to culture and education is one of the basic human rights (UN, 1955; IFLA/UNESCO, 1994; Council of Europe, 2006) which should be guaranteed to all people, and in particular to incarcerated persons who have been stripped of most of other rights and freedoms, and in most cases do not have access to regular library services in the outside community. Although prisoners often have a high level of illiteracy and poor educational attainment, their information needs and reading interests are similar to those of citizens on the outside (Finlay & Bates, 2018). Therefore prison libraries should be based on the public library model and support prisoners' varied educational, informational, legal and recreational needs. Prisoners should be offered free access to a well-balanced library collection consisting mainly of popular and current reading materials (Krolak, 2019). A professional librarian should take every effort to select diverse reading materials (fiction, non-fiction, and periodicals) which represents all viewpoints of a particular subject (Lehmann, 2000). Depending on the local circumstances, prisoners should have easy access to multicultural books, information and reading material in all languages spoken by inmates and in accessible formats (e.g. easy-to-read material). Also, a prison library should provide its users with a humane space where they can feel safe, and where they can exercise their freedom to choose what they want to think, read and do (in line with limitations imposed by their correctional facility).

The importance of prison libraries exhibits itself probably most prominently in relation to its support of prisoners' reading experiences, as pleasure reading or access to recreational reading materials has been noted as one of the most important prison library services (Lehmann, 2003). According to Krolak (2019) recreational reading in prisons provides a "calming and constructive way of passing free time, reducing boredom and offering solace, generating a feeling of normalcy in a closed environment, and as a means of distraction and escaping daily worries". Krolak (2019) further emphasized the importance of prisoners' choosing their own reading materials, and Garner (2020) points out that prisoners' current and frequent use of library, and their choice to read during some of their unstructured time brings a special feeling of satisfaction. Clark and MacCraeigh (2006) emphasize the importance of leisure reading in prison libraries, which they describe as reading any books in pursuit of entertainment, life enrichment and self-education, as a way to achieve psychological escape and emotional enrichment. Garner (2020), Schillinger (2009) and Begum (2011) also focus on leisure reading as a positive form of escapism i. e. taking one's mind off current circumstances. Two types of escapes are identifed: cognitive escape and physical escape (Sweeney, 2010; Garner, 2020). While physical escape involves visiting the prison library, the cognitive escape can be attained through reading books itself. Finlay and Bates (2018), Krolak (2019) and Garner (2020) make direct connection between pleasure reading in prisons and a feeling of freedom, and emphasize the importance of reading as a means of education. Several authors also establish a link between recreational reading and prisoners' wellbeing, a positive mental health and reduction of stress (Billington, 2011, Garner, 2019). Recreational reading in prisons has also be identified as a constructive way of avoiding trouble and alleviating the boredom which is very characteristic for the prison experience and often leads into criminal activity, and eventually recidivism (Garner, 2019).

Despite emerging recognition of multiple benefits of recreational reading in prisons, and its contribution to the rehabilitation and resocialization of prisoners, scholarly studies into prisoners' reading experience and the use of prison libaries are still rare. In order to contribute to the scholarly body of literature on this topic, a study into reading interests of Croatian prisoners has been conducted. Since Croatia's prison libraries face many challenges, such as those imposed by the lack of strategic support and professional staff, inadequate funding and poor collection building, in this study prisoners' perception and use of prison libraries has also been investigated

**Context of the study**

**Prisons in Croatia**

In line with international standards and modern legal practice, the main goal of a prison sentence in Croatia is to equip inmates with skills and competencies required for successful reintegration into the community as lawabiding citizens (Croatian Parliament, 2020). In order to achieve that, an individual rehabilitative programme is developed for each person sentenced to prison and it may include organised leisure activities, education and training, paid work etc. Although Croatia's correctional institutions face many problems that are experienced by similar institutions in other countries (overcrowded prisons, lack of qualified staff and budget cuts), legislature further stipulates that while in prison all inmates should be treated with respect and that they should be entitled to obtain professional legal assistance and maintain regular contact with the outside world and family.

Due to recent changes in criminal legislature, and increased possibilities for alternative sentencing in the form of probation, conditional discharge and early release, the number of incarcerated persons in the country has slightly decreased over last couple of years. For example, in 2017 it was estimated that Croatia's prison population rate was 75 persons per 100,000 inhabitants, while in 2013 it was 102 (Eurostat, 2020). According to the most recent data that is available (Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2018), on 31st December 2017 Croatian correctional facilities, which include six penitentiaries (where usually sentences longer than 6 months are served), 14 prisons, 2 correctional institutes for minors and one prison hospital, held 3190 persons. Majority were male (95.39%) and had a high school degree (49.34%). Only 0.90% of incarcerated persons could not read, write or did not have basic computer skills. The largest proportion of them fell in the age group 30 to 40 years (32.54%) and 40 to 50 years (22.44%). A third of incarcerated persons on this day (33.6%) were parents to 1325 children under 18. A total of 7.1% of incarcerated persons were foreigners (1.8% EU citizens, and 5.3% non-EU citizens). A total of 16.39% had substance use disorder, and 13.32% were diagnosed with alcohol use disorder. A significant proportion of incarcerated persons were recidivists: for 42.87% this was not their first time in prison. Two most frequent reasons for incarceration was a crime against property (35%) and a crime against a person (35%). On the day 31st December 2017, the largest group of prisoners were serving a sentence from one to three years (32.45%).

In 2017, a total of 465 prisoners took part in some formal educational program (outside of correctional facilities) or professional training (in most cases inside prison) for simple professions such as waitor, pizza chef, carpenter, gardener, computer operator, house painter, mason etc. Inmates had opportunity to participate in various sport activities and a rich collaboration with voluntary associations was reported, especially in relation to the organized leisure activities. Data for 2017 indicates that in penitentiaries, a total of 51% of inmates worked in some of these ways: helped out in their correctional facility (cleaning facilities, washing vehicles, washing laundry, helping out in the kitchen or prison shop etc.), worked in the prison workshop (with wood, metal, gardening etc.) and 11% worked for a company outside the prison (contract based).

Despite the fact that the current international and national prison legislature and standards assert that every correctional institution must have a well-stocked library and that inmates must be given an opportunity to borrow books from local public libraries, a number of studies (Horvat & Nebesny, 2004; De Villa, 2007; Šimunić, Faletar Tanacković & Badurina, 2016; Faletar Tanacković & Gabriel, 2019) show that the interpretation of this mandate varies widely across country's correctional institutions, as will be elaborated in the next section.

**Prison libraries in Croatia**

The most recent and unpublished study by Faletar Tanacković, Gabriel and Dragija Ivanović (2019) which surveyed 22 out of 23 correctional facilities in the country found out that over the course of 15 years (from 2003 through 2018) almost no improvement is noted in relation to prison library management, their space allocation, funding, staffing, collection development and user services. This study further confirmed findings obtained in earlier studies (De Villa, 2007; Horvat & Nebesny, 2004; Šimunić et al., 2016) which repeatedly indicated that prison libraries in Croatia are unevenly developed, inadequately funded, staffed by unqualified personnel, located in inadequate spaces and stocked with outdated, mostly donated books. For example, findings from this unpublished study indicate that two correctional institutions do not have a library or any kind of book collection, and only 11 (55%) libraries have a space designated for reading. Only three libraries have regular funding, and not one employs a professional librarian. Not one library reported having a collection development policy and in eight (47%) libraries collection building relies almost entirely on donations. For example, in 2018 only four (24%) libraries were subscribed to at least one daily newspaper while 15 (88%) did not buy a single book in the whole year. Prison libraries reported collaboration with public libraries but in most case this collaboration refers to (unsolicited) donations of discarded library books. In only 8 (36.4%) institutions inmates can check out books from local libraries. In most institutions (10, 50%) books are delivered to the cells and only in 9 (45%) inmates can visit the prison library i.e. a room with books in the prison.

Nevertheless, over last couple of years there have been several successful, although sporadic, prison library programs. For several years now selected prison libraries in the country join the national manifestation *Book* *Night* (usually marked in end April every year) with different book and reading promotion activities such as read alouds, storytelling workshops, public announcement of "the best prisoners readers" etc. On this occasion, most prisons in the country leave lights on a bit longer so that inmates can read long into the night (Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2018). In 2011 a voluntary association *Skribonauti* started a project named *Writers in Prisons*, whose aim is to bring literature and famous authors into prisons by organising literary meetings and book discussions (Hrgović, 2012). A mention should also be made of a rehabilitation program of guided reading with prisoners which was successfully implemented in 2012 in one of the penitentiaries in the country (Bagarić, 2018). Particularly successful is an ongoing, state-funded national prison reading program for parents and childrenorganized since 2014 by Croatian Reading Association and a voluntary association *Parents in Action*. In this awared-winning[[1]](#footnote-1) program inmates read and audio record selected books which are then sent to their children (Berak & Čunović, 2017).

Although several prison libraries in the country offer services to inmates which resemble to some degree those offered by public libraries in a free world, and their prison library programs have been successful and well accepted, it can be said without hesitation that the general state of prison librarianship in Croatia does not support the purpose and role of modern prison libraries.

While there have been several studies which investigated the country's prison libraries (their management, collection building etc.), the user experience of inmates was touched upon only by De Villa (2007) who investigated the reading habits and library use of 61 female prisoners in one penitentiary. In order to bridge this gap and learn about the inmates' experience, in particular their information needs and behavior, reading interests and habits, and use and perception of prison libraries, authors conducted the study presented in this paper. When possible, these findings will be compared with those obtained by De Villa.

**Methodology and Research Questions**

In this paper authors will present a portion of results obtained in a large national study which aimed to explore the information needs and behavior of inmates in Croatia’s prisons, to understand their reading interests and habits, and to learn about their perception and use of their prison library. In this paper authors will report findings related only to the following research questions:

RQ1: How much do prisoners read?

RQ2: What do they read?

RQ3: What do prisoners think about leisure reading?

RQ4: How do they perceive and use their prison library?

In line with the established research ethics, respondents were guaranteed anonymity and were informed that they are free to stop participating in the study at any point. Also, during the months-long preparation phase of the study, regular communication with representatives from Central Office of Prison Administration at the Croatian Ministry of Justice was maintained. As a result, details about the method to be used for collection of data were agreed upon and questions to be included in the survey were approved. Since it proved highly complicated to obtain the permission and arrange for the presence of researchers in prisons during the study, and it would also be too much a financial and time burden for researchers to visit all prisons which are scattered across the country, it was decided to mail print questionnaires to prisons. In order to achieve as representative sample as possible, 620 questionnaires were mailed to six penitentiaries in which inmates were imprisoned for a long-term period (over six months), and which have different levels of security (maximum, medium, minimum). Packages with questionnaires were accompanied by a supporting letter from the Ministry of Justice and instructional letter drafted by researchers. An official letter from the Ministry invited administration in selected prisons to facilitate the study, while researchers provided detailed instructions on how to conduct the study: print survey was to be distributed by prison officers to inmates during a lunch time. A total of 30% of prison population (male and female) in selected prisons was included in the study and a total of 504 valid questionnaires were returned (response rate of 81.3%).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Questionnaire consisted of 37 open, closed and Likert-type questions which could be grouped into five thematic sections: demographic data, information needs, information behavior, reading interests and habits, prison library perception and use.[[3]](#footnote-3) The data was analyzed with the help of statistical software SPSS.

**Findings**

The findings will be presented according to the research questions, following a short description of respondents demographic characteristics (gender, age, sentence etc.).

*General characteristics of respondents*

Out of 504 respondents, 437 (86.9%) were male and 66 (13.1%) female[[4]](#footnote-4) which is fairly close to the general ratio of male and female prisoners in Croatian correctional institutions. The majority of respondents fall into the age group 26-35 (182, 36.5%), have a high school degree (336, 66.9%) and were employed before imprisonment (257, 51.5%). Respondents reported that at least once in their lifetime they had a library card (372, 73.8%). (Table 1)

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **N** | **%** |
| **Gender** | Male | 437 | 86.9 |
| Female | 66 | 13.1 |
| **Age** | 18-25 | 41 | 8.2 |
| 26-35 | 182 | 36.5 |
| 36-45 | 146 | 26.3 |
| 46-60 | 98 | 19.6 |
| 60+ | 32 | 6.4 |
| **Education** | No formal schooling | 5 | 1 |
| Elementary school | 72 | 4.3 |
| High school | 336 | 66.9 |
| College or university | 89 | 17.7 |
| **Working status** | Student | 15 | 3 |
| Employed | 257 | 51.5 |
| Unemployed | 174 | 34.9 |
| Retired | 53 | 10.6 |
| **Previous public library membership** | Yes | 372 | 73.8 |
| No | 132 | 26.2 |

Respondents assessed their reading and writing skills (in Croatian) as very good (Mean 4.58 and 4.47 respectively) but their computer skills as good (Mean 3.31). On average, respondents were sentenced to a prison sentence of 5.18 years.

*Reading as a leisure activity*

Respondents have on average 2.35 hours a day of free time and they identify reading as their most popular leisure activity (68.7%) (Table 2). It is even slightly preferred to watching TV/listening radio (66.5%) and doing sports/walking (66.5%) which were listed as top leisure activities in the aforementioned study conducted by De Villa (2007). In that study, reading was third most popular leisure activity, and was preceded by watching TV and doing sports. Statistically significant difference was identified between female and male prisoners in respect to reading: female respondents read more often than male respondents (χ2 = 6.953, p=0.031).

Table 2. Leisure activities

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **N** | **%** |
| Reading | 346 | 68.7 |
| Watching TV/Listening to radio | 335 | 66.5 |
| Sports | 335 | 66.5 |
| Talking with other prisoners | 267 | 53 |
| Thinking | 212 | 42.1 |
| Playing board games | 189 | 37.5 |
| Relaxing and sleeping | 163 | 32.3 |
| Working | 162 | 32.1 |
| Something else | 65 | 12.9 |
| Creative writing | 54 | 10.7 |

When asked about their attitude toward leisure reading in general, large majority of respondents (349, 71.4%) identified that they love it and that it is their preffered pastime About a quarter of respondents (124, 25.4%) read only when they have to and 16 (3.3%) think that reading is a waste of time. Interestingly, there are more respondents who indicated reading as their preferred pastime (71.4%) then those who reported actually reading in their free time in prison (68.7%).

About a half of respondents (249, 50.7) reported that they read more now than they did before coming to prison. A total of 351 (70.9%) respondents reported that they read every day or several times a week. Only 7 (1.4%) respondents never read (Table 3). This again corresponds with the findings of De Villa (2007) which showed that only a small portion of respondents (5, 8.1%) in her study did not read while others read very often or sometimes. While 31 (6.2%) respondents did not read one book in past 365 days, 71 (14.2%) read from one to three books, 45 (9.0%) read four to five books and 69 (13.8%) read six to ten books. Interestingly, findings show that 51 (10.2%) respondents read over 50 books in the last year, and nine out of them read over 100 books in that one year.

Table 3. Reading frequency

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **N** | **%** |
| Every day or several times a week | 351 | 70.9 |
| Several times a month | 90 | 18.2 |
| Several times a year | 47 | 9.5 |
| Never | 7 | 1.4 |

*What do prisoners read?*

Based on the analysis of 708 individual titles and authors which respondents listed in their answer to an open question in which they were asked to list the books they have read recently, respondents read more fiction than non-fiction. Just like in the earlier study (De Villa, 2007), respondents most frequently read crime (159, 31.9%) and historical novels (61, 12.1%). They also reported reading religious literature (56, 11.1%), biographies (40, 8%), spiritual novels (39, 7.8%), social problem novels (26, 6.2%) psychology and self-help (24, 4.8%), memoires (23, 4.6%), war novels (18, 3.6%), science fiction (17, 3.4%), erotic novels (16, 3.2%), romances (16, 3.2%), spy novels (15, 3%) and horrors (12, 2.4%).[[5]](#footnote-5) This correlates only partially with their favorite and preferred readings in general: crime novels (210, 41.7%) historical novels (195, 38.7), biographies (183, 36.3%), adventure novels (140, 27.8%), health (138, 27.4%), reference (124, 24.6%), sports (117, 23.2%), travel (114, 22.6%), religion (105, 20.8%), textbooks (required for schooling) (102, 20.2%), romance (93, 18.5%), science fiction (88, 17.5%), computers (74, 14.7%), self-help (74, 14.7%), legislature (74, 14.7%), cookbooks (61, 12.1%), graphic novels (55, 10.9%), hobbies (54, 10.7%), drama (53, 10.5%), western (46, 9.1%)), poetry (40, 7.9%), fairy tales (15, 3%) and picture books (8, 0.4%). Careful inspection of all the findings compared in Figure 1 and 2 shows that there are large discrepancies between the respondents' preferred readings (what they would like to read) and what they actually read. It is evident that respondents have wide reading interests (both in relation to fiction and non-fiction) and that they would like to read a much more diverse range of reading materials than they actually do. For example, respondents would like to read graphic novels and poetry, but none reported reading them in the past year. The reason, most probably, lies in the fact that they do not have access to this kind of readings in their prison libraries.

Fig. 1. Comparison of the preferred and actually read books – fiction

These discrepancies are even more evident in Figure 2 which presents findings related to non-fiction. Respondents would like to read about sport, health, travel, computers, hobbies, cookbooks etc., but none reported reading such material. These types of reading materials are again probably absent form library collections in the studied instituions. Respondents in the De Villa study (2007) also stated that they would like to have access to more diverse and up-to-date reading materials, both fiction and non-fiction.

Fig. 2. Comparison of preferred and actually read books – non-fiction

Just like in the study conducted by De Villa (2007), respondents indicated that they would like to read more newspapers (272, 54%) and magazines (250, 49.6%). In addition, significantly more respondents indicated that they prefer to read daily or weekly newspapers which report news on current events in country and abroad (411, 81.5%) than specialized magazines, such as those dedicated to sports, health, computers, motorcycles and cars, fishing etc. (249, 49.4%).

*Respondents' perception of leisure reading*

A total of 323 (66.9%) respondents reported that reading makes their time in prison pass faster and 283 (58.8%) think that books and reading make their life in prison easier. About half of the respondents (225, 46.7%) think that reading is the best way to spend time in prison. Interestingly, 257 (53.4%) respondents do not think that books and reading are their window into the life outside of the prison. This is an interesting finding and could probably be explained by the fact that prison libraries very often hold collections of outdated and discarded publications which deal with topics that does not interest them intimately, and that prison libraries lack reading rooms where prisoners could come and indulge in reading (Table 4).

Table 4. Perception of reading

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Mean** |
| Reading makes my time in prison pass faster. | 3.72 |
| Reading makes my life in prison easier. | 3.58 |
| Reading is the best way to spend time in prison. | 3.34 |
| Books and reading are my window into the life outside of the prison. | 2.84 |

*Respondents' perception and use of the prison library*

A total of 181 (36.8%) respondents visit the prison library every day or several times a week. Only 73 (14.8%) respondents visit their prison library several times a year, and 95 (19.3%) never visit the prison library. These findings are similar to those obtained earlier by De Villa (2007) with 43.5% respondents who did not use the prison library or used it very rarerly. Statistically significant difference is identified in relation to the gender: female respondents visit the library more often than male respondents (χ2 = 13.550, p=0.009). When in library, similar to De Villa study (2007), majority of respondents checks out books (324, 79.2%). Only 98 (24%) respondents come to the library to sit in a quiet room and read, and 64 (15,6%) come to watch TV or listen to radio programs. Respondents also very rarely come to the library to socialize with other prisoners (48, 11.7%) and play games (47, 11.5%). Only 16 (3.9%) respondents reported that they visit the library in order to participate in some organized library program.

In order to choose the books they want to check out most respondents who visit the library (297, 72.6%) browse the library shelves freely and independently. Only 89 (21.8%) report using the library catalogue or some kind of a printed listing with books held in library. More frequently will respondents ask other prisoners for a recommendation on what to read next (132, 32.3%), than they will ask a person in charge of the library (114, 22.6%). The reason behind this probably lies, at least to a certain degree, in the fact that prison libraries in Croatia do not employ professional librarians, and prison officers or prisoners who are in charge of these libraries are not perceived to be knowledgeable enough to provide readers' advisory service. In most cases reading material is chosen based on the genre and the topic dealt with in the book (233, 46.2%) and the familiarity with the author (181, 35.9%).

Only about a quarter (99, 24.7%) of respondents are satisfied with their prison library collection, and even less (26, 5.2%) always find in their prison library what they are looking for. When respondents want to read something that their prison library does not have they borrow it from other prisoners (281, 55.8%), buy it in the prison shop (116, 23%) (this applies only to newspapers) or ask their families and friends to send it to them (259, 51,4%). Only 54 (10.7%) respondents reported checking out books that their library does not have from the local public library and/or mobile library that visits their prison.

Respondents who never visit the library or do so rarely (e.g. several times a year) were asked to elaborate why they do not go to the prison library. Almost a fifth (96, 19.5%) of respondents do not visit the library because it has only outdated literature. Somewhat less frequently, respondents do not go to the library because their library does not have a computer (with Internet connection) which they could use (83, 16.5%), it does not have books that they find interesting (63, 12.5%) and it does not subscribe to any newspapers or magazines (46, 9.1). Some respondents think that their prison library has too small a collection 43 (8.5%), and 45 (8.9%) find the library's working hours inadequate (they cannot manage to visit it during their free time). Opening hours were listed as one of the most important reasons in the De Villa (2007) study for not visiting the library. A total of 25 (5%) respondents reported that they do not visit the library in the prison because it does not exist, and 12 (2.4%) are not allowed to visit the library due to security measures imposed on them. Several respondents described that they do not use the library because of their poor sight (and the library does not have any reading material for visually impaired prisoners). The lack of the reading material in languages other than Croatian was reported by one respondent (0.2%). Interestingly, 13 (2.6%) respondents do not use the library because they do not feel welcome (Table 5).

Table 5. Reasons for not visiting the prison library

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **N** | **%** |
| Outdated reading material | 92 | 18.3 |
| No computer | 83 | 16.5 |
| Something else | 65 | 12.9 |
| No interesting books | 61 | 12.1 |
| No newspapers or magazines | 46 | 9.1 |
| No interesting programs are offered | 44 | 8.7 |
| Limited collection | 43 | 8.5 |
| Inadequate opening time | 32 | 6.3 |
| Prison library does not exist | 25 | 5 |
| Reading material is in poor physical shape | 25 | 5 |
| Reading material is badly organized | 15 | 3 |
| Not allowed to visit the library due to security measures | 12 | 2.4 |
| Visit to the library is a waste of time. | 12 | 2.4 |
| Do not feel welcome in the library. | 12 | 2.4 |
| Do not know when the library is open. | 9 | 1.8 |

Finally, respondents were asked to suggest improvements to their prison library so that it could better serve their needs. In line with findings obtained by De Villa (2007), the majority (378, 75%) of respondents would like to have access to computers (378, 75%) and computer training workshops (175, 34.7%). A total of 141 (28%) would like to have access to legal resources and professionals who could introduce them to the Croatian legal system and practice, 133 (26.4%) would like to listen to music CDs and 103 (20.4%) would like their library to have board games that they could check out. Concerts were listed by 102 (20.2%), book talks and discussions with contemporary Croatian authors by 100 (19.9%), visiting theater shows by 86 (17.1%), exhibitions by 52 (10.3%), literacy (reading and writing) instruction by 35 (6.9%), and creative writing by 33 (6.5%) respondents. One respondent reported that he would like to have someone who could read to him (0.2%) (Table 6).

Table 6. Proposed programs for library

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **N** | **%** |
| Computers | 378 | 75 |
| ICT training | 175 | 34.7 |
| Croatian legal system and practice – resources and training | 141 | 28 |
| Music | 133 | 26.4 |
| Board games | 103 | 20.4 |
| Concerts | 102 | 20.2 |
| Theater | 86 | 17.1 |
| Author evenings | 61 | 12.1 |
| Exhibition | 52 | 10.3 |
| Book talks | 39 | 7.7 |
| Reading and writing workshops | 35 | 6.9 |
| Creative writing | 33 | 6.5 |

**Discussion**

In this paper only a portion of results obtained from a large national study have been reported, notably the findings related to reading interests and habits of inmates in Croatia’s prisons, and their perception and use of prison libraries. Reported findings are largely supported by the existing research literature which indicates that reading is regarded as a meaningful and popular leisure activity among prisoners, but also that the quality of prison library collections and services varies greatly among different countries or different institutions within a country.

Respondents in this study identified reading as their most popular leisure activity, even more popular than watching TV, listening to the radio and doing sports. Similar results were obtained by Peschers (2013) who established that reading was the most popular leisure activity among the Münster prison population in Germany (79%). Also in Belgium, library had the highest participation rate (85.8%) among different kinds of social-cultural activities and programs (Brosens, De Donder, Dury, Vanwing & Verté, 2015). In line with general gender differences related to reading, in-depth analysis showed that female respondents read significantly more often than their male counterparts.

As educational, informational and recreational centre for the entire prison community, the prison library is, according to Krolak (2019), "a space abounding with possibilities, all of which lend themselves to constructive ways of spending what all inmates have: time." Respondents in this study pointed out that reading makes their life in prison easier and that their time in prison passes faster with books. This finding supports Garner (2017) who reported that prison libraries are highly effective as places which support the prisoners' wellbeing, by providing opportunities for autonomy, by acting as a therapeutic space and by supporting positive behavior management.

Respondents also indicated that they read more (both in terms of frequency of reading and the number of books read) during imprisonment than they read before coming to prison: a large majority reads for pleasure every day or several times a week. Similarly, an Algerian study found out that 24% of prisoners started reading after incarceration (Mehdi, 2017). Also, a study in the German award-winning Münster prison library reported that 60% of respondents read for an average of two hours per day, which far exceeds the amount of time they spent reading prior to their incarceration (Peschers, 2013). Although the number of books read during the year preceding the study varies greatly among respondents, only 6.2% respondents did not read one book in that period, while 10.2% read over 50 books. Interestingly, the findings indicate that there are slightly more respondents who indicated reading as their preferred pastime (those who like to read and would like to read) than those who reported actually reading in their free time during imprisonment. The reason behind this could be that respondents do not have free access to books and other reading material in their correctional facilities.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A total of 36.8% respondents reported that they visit the prison library regularly (every day or several times a week) and almost a fifth of respondents does not visit the library at all. In contrast, the prison library is regularly used by 76% of inmates in Ghana (Mfum, 2012), 80% in German prison in Münster (Peschers, 2013) and 75% in Chile (Rivera Donoso, 2018). Relatively low use of prison libraries in the studied institutions is caused in most cases by unresponsive and outdated collections, lack of computers with Internet connection, inadequate working hours or mere inexistence of the library in the prison. Although use of information and communication technology in prison environment is a highly complex issue, modern technology should be integrated in the prison library, considering both the intellectual freedoms and prison security issues (Krolak, 2019).

Although respondents read more fiction than non-fiction and have wide reading interests, they would like to read a much more diverse reading material than they actually do. Comparative analysis of findings shows that there are large discrepancies between the respondents' preferred readings (what they would like to read) and what they actually read. Most frequently they read crime novels, thrillers, and historical novels (which are widely available), and to a lesser degree they read religious literature, biographies, spiritual novels, social problem novels, self-help, war novels, science fiction, erotic novels, romances, spy novels and horrors. However, respondents expressed a desire to read daily newspapers and magazines, graphic novels and poetry, books about sport, health, travel, computers, hobbies, cookbooks etc. which are in most cases poorly represented or even non-existent in their prison library collections. The gap between the desired library collection in which materials are selected according to the library collection management policy and needs of the prison population is evident in many prison libraries world wide (Sutter, 2015). For example, in his report on the right to education of persons in detention to the UN Human Rights Council, Muñoz (2009) stated that only some prison libraries have what is considered a carefully selected, needs-based and constantly evolving collection, and that in reality many prison libraries are filled with old and often irrelevant books and materials.

Since many prison libraries in the country do not have a designated reading area, it does not come as a surprise that majority of respondents (79.2%) come to the library just to check out books, and very rarely to spend some time to there sitting in peace and quiet (24%) or socialize with others (11.7%).

When choosing the next book to read, respondents in most case rely on the recommendation of other inmates or browse the shelves, and very rarely they ask a person in charge of the library. This does not come as a surprise, in particular if we know that not one prison library in the country employs a professional librarian who would be qualified to provide a quality readers' advisory service. While qualified library staff are regularly employed for example in Norway and Netherlands, in many countries the professional librarians are inconsistently employed and very often prison libraries are run by prison staff, who usually have other duties in addition to supervising the library (Krolak, 2019).

Only about a quarter of respondents are satisfied with their prison library collection, and even less (5.2%) always find in their prison library what they are looking for. Similarly, a study conducted in four prisons in Nigeria established that around 85% of prisoners found the their prison library collection inadequate (Sambo et al., 2017).

When respondents want to read something that their prison library does not have, in most cases they borrow it from other prisoners or ask their families and friends to send it to them. Since collaboration of prison libraries with local public libraries in the country is very sporadic, and in most cases refers only to donation of discarded books, it does not come as a surprise that respondents only rarely have a chance to obtain their reading material from the local public library. Sporadic collaboration with public libraries is unfortunately reported by studies conducted in several other countries, such as Bulgaria (Tsvetkova and Adrekova, 2016), Ghana (Mfum, 2012), etc.

**Conclusion**

While it is generally accepted that prison libraries have a significant potential to improve the literacy and educational level of prisoners, and thus increase their employability, reduce recidivism and crime rate in general, the national standards for library services in prisons in Croatia still do not exist and it is continuously proving extremely challenging to adhere to general professional library values and practices (Faletar Tanacković et al., 2019; Šimunić et al., 2015). Despite the fact that prison libraries in the country have been poorly manged, financed and stocked for a long time, recently there has been a growing interest in prison librarianship among library professionals and relevant prison administration.[[7]](#footnote-7) It seems, for the first time, that there is a sincere wish to start a long and tedious journey to provide a quality library service for every prisoner.

It is believed that findings obtained in the reported study can facilitate to some point the arduous task of providing inmates with free access to information and responsive collections with diverse reading materials, and designing libraries which are truly informational, recreational, cultural and educational centre of every correctional institution in the country (Krolak, 2019).

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**Appendix 1.**

**Most frequently read international authors**

Cecilia Ahern, Dante Alighieri, Renzo Allegri, Isaac Asimov, Henri Jean Aubrin, Honore de Balzac, René Belbenoît, Richard Branson, Dan Brown, Bible, Pearl S. Buck, Charles Bukowski, Meg Cabbot, Carlos Castaneda, Miquel de Cervantes, Raymond Chandler, Lee Child, Agatha Christie, Arthur C. Clarke, Harlan Coben, Paulo Coelho, Patricia Cornwell, Michael Crichton, Archibald Joseph Cronin, Jennifer Cruise, Nicky Cruz, Erich von Daeniken, Charles Darwin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexandre Dumas, Ben Elton, Gulshan Esther, William Faulkner, Zoe Ferraris, Gustave Flaubert, Ken Follett, Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Anthony Giddens, Malcolm Gladwell, Zane Grey, John Grisham, Arthur Hailey, Robert Harris, Sven Hassel, Ernest Hemingway, Kai Hermann, Herman Hesse, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Adolf Hitler, Homer, Michel Houellebecq, Aldous Huxley, David Icke, Anton Ingolič, Erica Jong, Carl Gustav Jung, Franz Kafka, Jeanne Kalogridis, Stephen King, Hans Helmut Kirs, Ephraim Kishon, Dean R. Koontz, Jerzy Kosiński, Elizabeth Kostova, Philip Kotler, Milan Kundera, E. L. James, James Joyce, Stieg Larrson, John Le Carre, David Lodge, Jack London, Robert Ludlum, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, George R. R. Martin, Andy McNab, Michael Nostradamus, Anthony de Mello, Cesar Millan, Henry Miller, Earl Mindell, Giuseppe Montanari, Vladimir Nabokov, Jo Nesbo, Michael Newton, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michael D. O'Brien, James Patterson, Norman Vincent Peale, Petar Petrović Njegoš, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Mario Puzo, Kate Quinn, Osho Rajneesh, Ian Rankin, Joseph Ratzinger, James Redfield, Erich Maria Remarque, Francine Rivers, Harold Robbins, Anders Roslund, J. K. Rowling, Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade, J. D. Salinger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Meša Selimović, Sidney Sheldon, Daniel Silva, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Karin Slaughter, L. J. Smith, Aleksandar Isaevicg Solzenicyn, Susan Sontag, Irving Stone, Mihail Aleksandrovich Sholohov, J. R. R. Tolkien, Lav Nikolajevich Tolstoy, Fulvio Tomizza, Joao Tordo, Donald Trump, Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev, Kurt Vonnegut, Edgar Wallace, Minette Walters, Dan Wells, Ellen White, David Wilkerson, Louis de Wohl, George O. Wood, Virginia Woolf, Emile Zola, Markus Zusak etc.

**Most frequently read Croatian authors**

Ivo Andrić, Ivan Aralica, Ivo Balenović, Aleksa Beniga, Stipe Božić, Pavao Brajša, Ivo Brešan, Ivana Brlić Mažuranić, Eden Bušić, Mile Dedaković-Jastreb, Dragutin Domjanić, Slavenka Drakulić, Miro Gavran, Maja Gluščević, Joža Horvat, Tomislav Ivančić, Miljenko Jergović, Marija Jurić Zagorka, Dinko Jonjić, Vilim Karlović, Josip Kozarac, Mirjana Krizmanić, Gustav Krklec, Miroslav Krleža, Nada Landeka, Đorđe Ličina, Predrag Lucić, Zvonimir Majdak, Željko Malnar, Igor Mandić, Janko Matko, Antun Gustav Matoš, Neven Orhel, Jurica Pavičić, Pavao Pavličić, Andrea Petrlik Huseinović, Gajo Petrović, Edo Popović, Ivan Raos, Majda Rijavec, Suzana Rog, Velimir Srića, Ivan Supek, Rudi Supek, August Šenoa, Martin Špegelj, Karlo Štajner, Goran Tribuson, Tin Ujević, Gabro Vidović, Jelena Vrsaljko, Milana Vuković Runjić, Nives Zeljković etc.

1. International Literacy Association awarded this program with an Award for Innovative Reading Promotion in Europe 2017.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on the number of inmates in each studied penitentiary, as provided by the Central Office of Prison Administration at the Croatian Ministry of Justice, the total number of survey sent is as follows: 135 to Glina, 200 to Lepoglava (high security), 30 to Turopolje, 45 to Lipovica – Popovača and 170 Požega (medium security) and 40 to Valtura (minimum security). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As already stated, in this paper only selected findings relating to reading interests and habits, and prison library perception and use will be presented. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Official data indicated that at the time of the study there were ca 120 female prisoners in Croatian prisons. Therefore it could be said that about a half of all female inmates responded to the survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A list of international and Croatian authors that respondents listed most frequently are available in Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In one of the studied institutions the library is located in its high security section and prisoners who are living in a lesser security section need to obtain a special permission to visit the library. This is probably reason why a certain number of respondents, at least in that particular institution, do not visit the library. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Most notably, it is evident in the fact that in September 2019 a roundtable on prison libraries has been organized by the Section for Library Services to People with Special Needs of Croatian Librarians' Associations which initiated for the first time the general discussion and cooperation of library profession and prison administration. Following the Roundtable, representatives of both parties drafted collaboratively a document which identified steps that need to be taken in order to facilitate quality library services in Croatian prisons. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)