Community-Led Librarianship:

Abolition Through Public Space Reform

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Libraries are public spaces where people can access information, technology, and resources for free. In an era where third spaces and free spaces are going extinct due to the simulated community spaces of social media and video games, it is becoming increasingly clear that digital data-driven feeds are no replacement for physical spaces full of local strangers. Public libraries remain one of the last institutions dedicated to serving the overlooked but vital social location of free space for all people, but as issues stemming from racial capitalism, the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), and social reproduction of poverty, libraries require drastic reform to continue serving communities (Clemens & Farrell, 2025; L. Freeman, 2017; Gilmore, 2007).

With complete prison abolition as the end goal, *Community-Led Librarianship (CLL) can steward the construction of adequate social services to end the death cycle that marginalized people have been sucked into by the PIC for generations.* This paper supports this claim by analyzing the issues affecting public libraries, the correlations between libraries and prisons, some examples of work being done towards abolition within libraries, and what more it would take to accomplish the end goal of creating libraries as safe and helpful public spaces for all people.

A major inconsistency impacting how libraries operate is the multiplicity of 'the public'. Lisa M Freeman and Nick Blomley (2018) point out the conflict libraries experience as places which house public property, by recognizing that 'public property' can mean property of the state or property of the people. Public libraries in North America are mostly run through municipal governments, which makes them apparatuses of the state (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). By maintaining a relationship with the state, libraries can receive necessary funding to maintain free and inclusive service, but both their funding and their services are contingent on constantly

shifting political landscapes. To expand the functions of libraries to accommodate the growing need for a better social safety net, libraries must be able to adopt a mutual-aid philosophy to their resources, regarding them as the property of the people, an approach which is difficult to facilitate effectively so long as the state controls just how public it wishes its property to be (L. Freeman, 2017; L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018).

For a library to be a public space full of public property, it must be willing to accommodate the entire public inclusively. When people are denied access to library services or space because of factors beyond their control (for example, lacking a registered address), they are being excluded from their community. When people's behaviour in public spaces is policed by standards based on conceptions of what is appropriate for private/public spaces (sleeping, personal grooming, substance use), those without access to private spaces are again excluded from their community (James, 2000; L. Freeman, 2017; L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). Homeless people not only deserve to be included in definitions of 'the public', but also be involved with discussions around what services libraries should have, since those without private property are the most dependent on adequate public property (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018).

Prisons represent the opposite of public spaces. Mobility, location, duration of stay, and behaviour within are all heavily policed, often with force. Property in prisons is definitely state property, and incarcerated people lack access to any materials outside of what the prison provides them. The rights of inmates are stripped away under the notion that by committing a crime against society's laws, they are no longer considered members of society (Gilmore, 2007). For libraries to adopt similar policies to those of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) would mean failure to fulfill their duties as a public institution (L. Freeman, 2017). Policing in any space perpetuates harm against marginalized peoples, meaning the divestment from police

presence and surveillance within libraries is critical for establishing safe and sustainable mutual aid networks (Abolitionist Library Association, 2019).

The entanglements between existing library governance models and the PIC are intricate and deeply structural, both being apparatuses for social reform (Clemens & Farrell, 2025). However, where libraries sought to accommodate the needs of the people by providing access to public property (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018), prisons sought to punish behaviours (and people) deemed deviant by the state (Gilmore, 2007; James, 2000). Neither institution's approach to solving society's issues has been adequately effective. Still, since the PIC is more profitable for private businesses and the state, the prison fix has been adopted as the North American solution to crime, poverty, mental health issues, and defiance to the state (Gilmore, 2007). Even if possible, closing all prisons today would not undo the intergenerational damage the PIC has done to marginalized, racialized, and impoverished communities. Effective and sustainable abolition also requires the construction of supportive frameworks, which can treat the root causes of criminality, as well as transformative justice faculties to help rehabilitate incarcerated people already locked in cycles of harm by the PIC (Abolitionist Library Association, 2019; Clemens & Farrell, 2025; Davis et al., 2022; Gilmore, 2007).

A common sentiment among abolitionists is the notion that reform is not an option, or at least nothing short of stripping the prison system down to the studs would provide enough distance from the traumatic historical context the PIC embodies (Davis et al., 2022). This opinion is valid when strictly applied to prisons, but it is important to consider how the reformation of surrounding institutions, such as public libraries, creates the necessary social framework to eventually fully abolish prisons (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018; Gilmore, 2007). The Abolitionist Library Association (n.d.) focused on the immediate risk of police presence in

libraries, calling for library stakeholders and decision-makers to divest from the PIC and policing. This is an important early step in prison abolition from library workers, but the Abolitionist Library Association (AbLA) was unable to gather sufficient momentum as a social movement organization to facilitate much change beyond some petitions and calls to action. As clear as the AbLA's goals are (Abolitionist Library Association, n.d.), abolition remains contentious, even among social justice advocates.

Community-led Librarianship (CLL) is a community-oriented approach to how libraries are organized, which seeks to include and accommodate the needs of marginalized community members, expanding the scope of the 'public' that public libraries serve (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). Despite not being a formal social movement organization, CLL has been used in the United Kingdom and has begun to take hold in some Canadian libraries. By allowing visibly homeless people to use the public property of libraries, it shows a willingness of libraries to recalibrate to the needs of the people (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). Library administrations can be stubborn, but by empowering librarians and library faculty to make decisions based on their experiences from direct engagement with the public, they can transfer the property of the library from that of the state to that of the people (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018).

Any space, even public space, must have certain rules to guide a cohesive, respectful, and sustainable shared existence. In prisons, these rules are entirely decided by the state and enforced by armed guards. Libraries, however, are less clear-cut (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). It becomes difficult to navigate the needs of the most vulnerable people in a community, with those of the rest, a position which librarians and library policy makers find themselves in when attempting to enact library reform (L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). Still, CLL shows incredible promise as a system for deciding what rules should and should not exist within public

space, and it is in the best interest of all community members to provide input and data to help librarianship steward a social safety net that serves the public inclusively (L. Freeman, 2017; L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). Mutual aid through community outreach requires more than just community support; libraries need massive funding increases to expand their breadth of services. They also need the jurisdiction to make these decisions on behalf of the community, rather than the interests of municipalities or private investors (L. Freeman, 2017; L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018). Under these conditions, a unified social movement for library reform would be able to facilitate the necessary groundwork to then begin a more direct concerted effort towards complete prison abolition (Davis et al., 2022; L. Freeman, 2017; L. M. Freeman & Blomley, 2018).

Citations

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