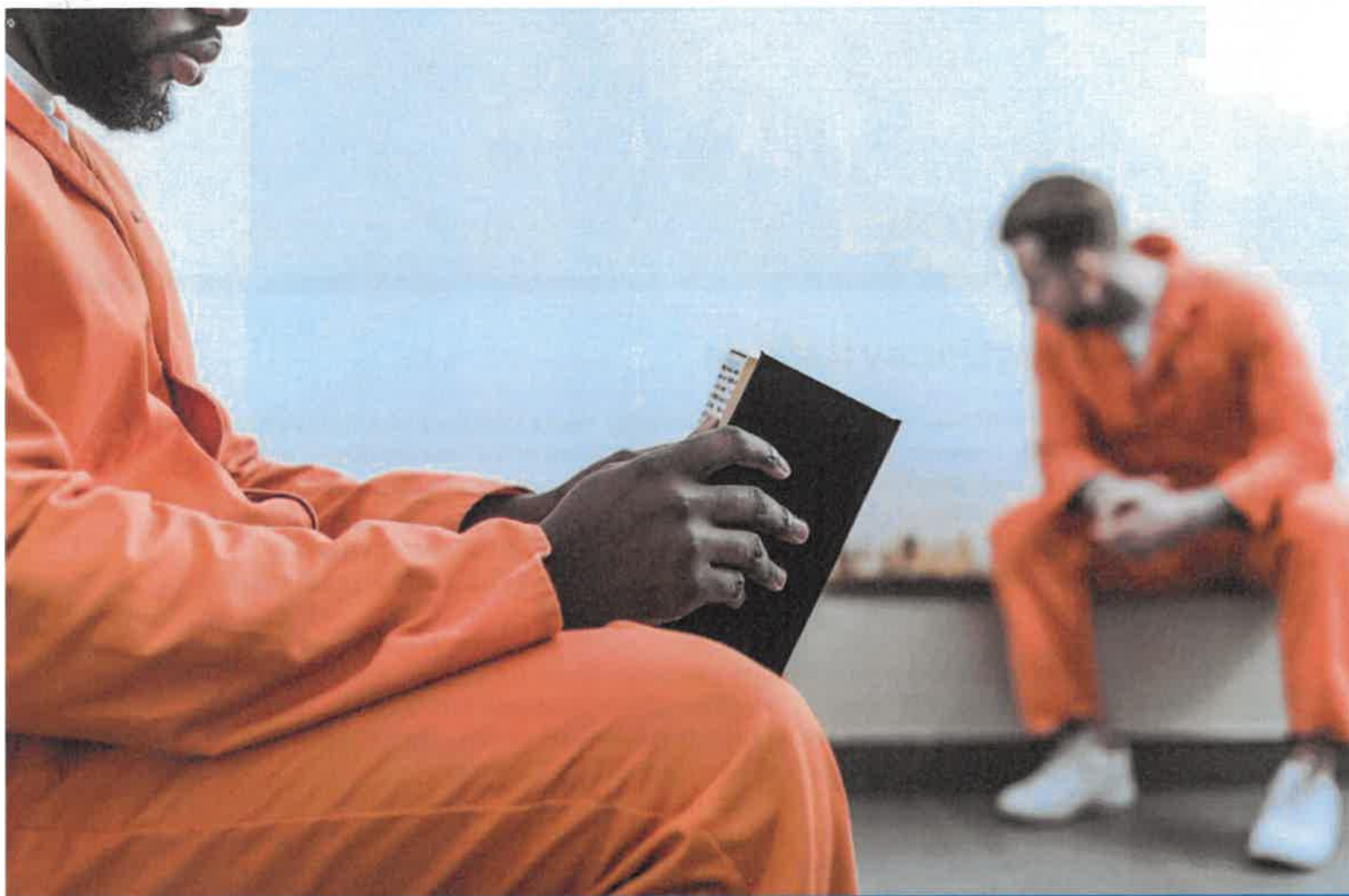




The Impact of Literacy and Library Services on Crime Rates and Public Safety

Data exploration and report by the EveryLibrary Institute



**EveryLibrary
Institute**

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About the EveryLibrary Institute

The EveryLibrary Institute NFP operates exclusively for educational and charitable purposes, including primarily research, writing, publishing and related activities concerning public, academic, and school libraries in the United States for the purpose of public education, strengthening the civic life of communities, bridging social and societal gaps, and for the future of the profession of librarianship. It is chartered in the state of Illinois as a non-profit corporation and received its 501(c)3 nonprofit designation as a charitable organization in June 2018.

The EveryLibrary Institute is a companion organization to EveryLibrary the first national political action committee for libraries. The EveryLibrary Institute's mission of research, training librarians, and programmatic support for libraries is closely aligned with EveryLibrary's 501(c)4 mission of building voter support for libraries.

The EveryLibrary Institute NFP is chartered in the State of Illinois as a nonprofit corporation and has received its 501(c)3 designation from the IRS. The EveryLibrary Institute is ready to partner with foundations, philanthropic organizations, associations, non-profits, and academic institutions to enhance public perception of libraries and librarianship through research-driven direct engagement across American society. We hope to see benefits for library funding accrue at the ballot box, and at all levels of government, from our partnership-driven work.

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Acknowledgements

We would love to acknowledge the hard work of our team members for making this report possible. This report has been developed, written, reviewed, and edited by a number of volunteers and staff without which, it would not have been possible.

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Introduction

It is a common refrain that a lack of access to education is one of the major contributing factors to incarceration in the United States. What is not as commonly discussed is the direct impact that reading and literacy skills specifically have on levels of incarceration and crime rates. Adults with low literacy skills are far more likely to be under- or unemployed and therefore more likely to turn to criminal activities for financial survival. Children of parents with limited literacy skills are more likely not to graduate high school and end up in the criminal justice system. Public and school libraries have long served as community anchors and centers of literacy education. In this paper we demonstrate the impact that literacy levels have on educational achievement and crime rates. We also demonstrate how public and school libraries can positively impact reading and literacy levels and help reduce crime in their communities. Finally, we will propose policy and funding propositions that could lead to lower rates of crime and incarceration.

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Literacy Rates and Incarceration

Low literacy skills are one of the greatest common factors for individuals in custody in the United States. Across the country, 85% of juveniles and 60% of adults within the criminal justice system are functionally illiterate (Literacy Statistics). Within the adult population, 70% of individuals cannot read at a 4th grade level, and only one-third have completed high school (Atlms, 2016; Smalley, 2016). In juvenile populations, more than half have reading skills that are below grade level (Center, 2015). When compared to peers who have completed a four-year degree, high school dropouts are 63% more likely to be incarcerated (Sum, 2009). Moreover, those individuals who are still illiterate after serving their sentence have a high probability of re-offending and re-entering the criminal justice system (Foundation, 2015).

The road to low literacy skills and an increased potential for incarceration begins at an early age. According to the Department of Justice, “[t]he link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure,” (Atlms, 2016). A longitudinal study of four thousand children has shown that those who cannot read on level by third grade are four times more likely to dropout of high school. Those unable to master even basic reading skills by third grade are six times more likely to drop out (Hernandez, 2011). Without early intervention from schools, libraries, and parents/guardians with sufficient literacy themselves, children can very quickly fall behind peers and never catch up. Further studies have shown that children who have difficulty reading in first grade are 88% more likely to struggle in grade four and fail to thrive academically (Zoukis, 2017). When coupled, research regarding reading competency and on the literacy skills of incarcerated individuals, provides strong evidence that lower literacy rates are a key contributing factor to the national crime rate and levels of incarceration. Without a basic level of academic competencies or credentials, criminal activities become a more probable means of financial survival.

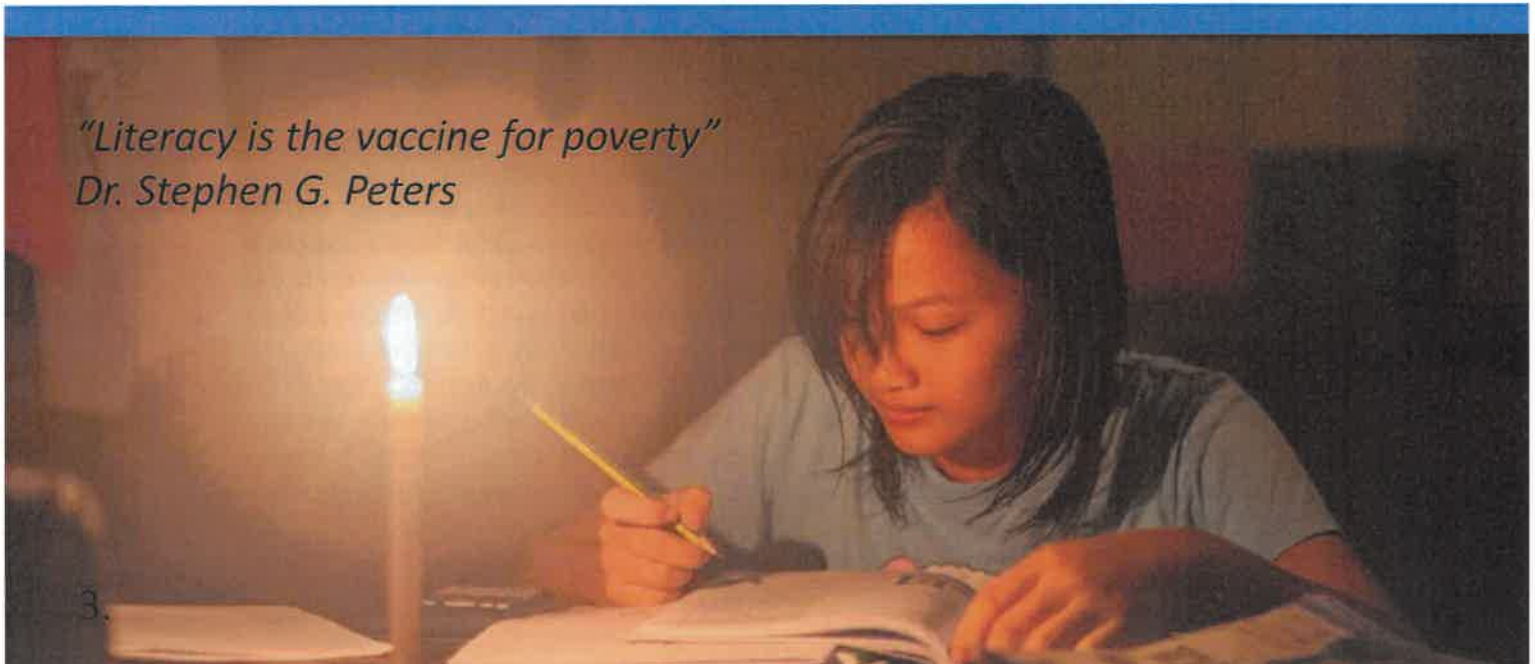
Crime rate is defined as the count of crimes compiled to assess the effectiveness of a crime control policy, and the impact of the policy on the risk of crime victimization. Since 1930, the F.B.I. has administered the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR). The Uniform Crime Reporting Program is a nationwide, cooperative statistical effort of more than 17,000 city, county, and state law enforcement agencies voluntarily reporting data on crimes brought to their attention. Law enforcement agencies active in the UCR Program represented 93.4 percent of the total population as established by the Bureau of Census. (US Legal, Inc.) This program is the source of the data for this report.

Literacy Rates and the Cycle of Poverty

The connection between low literacy skills and poverty is well-established. Lower literacy levels are directly linked to lower incomes and lifetime earning potential, and a higher likelihood of being unemployed compared to literate peers (Causes of Illiteracy, Gunn, 2018). Even for jobs that do not require much reading, the inability to understand and complete a written job application severely limits a person's employment potential. Unemployment rates for those who are illiterate is 2-5% higher than for those with a bachelor's degree (Causes of Illiteracy). Moreover, workers without a high school diploma earn an average of \$452 per month; while those with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$1,829 per month (Smalley, 2016). With consistently increasing demands for workers with higher levels of education and comparable skill sets, people with lower literacy skills have been, and will continue to be, left behind the information and technology economies, among others (Sessoms).

The disparities in pay between those with high literacy skills and those with low literacy skills are often passed onto children, contributing to an intergenerational cycle of poverty. Children of parents with low literacy skills are five times more likely not to graduate high school and more likely to live in poverty as adults (Strauss, 2016). These same children have a seven in ten chance of reading below grade level in part because parents/guardians with low reading skills are unable to assist their children with homework, reading, and related activities (Literacy in America; Gunn, 2018; Causes of Illiteracy). Without the introduction of reading at crucial early developmental stages, subsequent developmental stages and skills become difficult to master. Without outside action or intervention, most of these children will follow in their parent's footsteps and are at great risk for living in poverty themselves.

"Literacy is the vaccine for poverty"
Dr. Stephen G. Peters





Libraries and Literacy Education

Public Libraries

For generations, American public libraries have been champions of literacy. Across the country public library programming centered around reading and early childhood literacy skills is almost universal. In Pennsylvania, for example, more than 90% of public libraries offer programs or activities designed specifically for young children (newborn-preschool) (Celano, 2001). These include programs like storytimes & lap-sits (programs where adult caregivers hold babies who cannot hold themselves up), arts & crafts, as well as both guided and free play activities. They also offer free books, toys, tools, and online services designed for a variety of grade and/or reading levels.

While public libraries are known for their children's programming, library-based adult literacy programs are integral to the education of people in urban, suburban, and rural settings (Kong, 2013). These programs help adults establish and/or strengthen their literacy skills for both personal and career development. Not only do they support improved literacy skills for native English speakers, they increasingly provide services for those learning English as a second language (ESL). The Camden County Library System in New Jersey, for example, formed a partnership with Literacy Volunteers of America to provide both basic literacy and ESL programs and tutors to county residents (About LVCC). When libraries improve literacy rates for children and adults they are directly contributing to the social and economic potential of those individuals and their community.

Libraries and Literacy Education

School Libraries

School libraries have been shown to improve student literacy levels especially in elementary settings. Since 1992, research has reliably shown a connection between school-based library programs and student achievement. It goes on to state that, “graduation rates and test scores in reading and math were significantly higher in schools with high-quality libraries and certified librarians, even after controlling for school size and poverty, (Lance, 2018) [emphasis added].” Notably, the report also states that schools that the loss of librarians and/or library staff had a corresponding drop in reading scores (Lance, 2018). School libraries and classroom libraries (book collections in the actual classroom) create access to reading materials and can help improve literacy skills (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). With few exceptions, classroom reading time has been shown to increase reading skills in students (Neuman). School librarians or media specialists are specifically trained to teach students reading, research, and other skills essential for literacy. They are able to supplement their classroom counterparts through instruction and books and other materials. These properly supported school librarians and libraries make a difference in literacy ability at all grade levels.



Discussions and Propositions

With appropriate funding and staffing, public and school libraries can improve literacy skills and help to lower crime rates. Low literacy skills are the most common contributing factor to populations who are incarcerated and/or living in poverty. Lack of literacy is a self-perpetuating cycle that prohibits generations from achieving personal and economic independence. Increased funding for public and school libraries in conjunction with partnerships among private or non-profit literacy groups and libraries can help generations of Americans improve their personal and professional opportunities.

“Exposing children to language and early literacy learning is critical to chang[ing] the trajectory of academic failure that begins in early childhood and continues to spiral downward throughout later childhood and adulthood,” (Neuman S., 1996). Public libraries are the best positioned public institution to provide early-childhood introductions to reading and play concepts essential for learning development. With over 16,500 locations across the country, and a long tradition of children’s programming and education, public libraries are ideally placed, have the expertise, and have the cultural competencies to interface with families including at-risk populations. After all, public librarians are serving the communities in which they themselves live. Public libraries as an institution (and as a government institution at that) enjoy strong community support with 79% of adults describing them as “very important,” a measure of support that goes up to 84% with parents of young children (Pew Internet, 2013). Americans also feel strongly about public libraries as a community resource:

A majority of Americans feel [public] libraries are doing a good job of providing a safe place for people to hang out or spend time (69% feel libraries contribute “a lot” to their communities in this regard) as well as opening up educational opportunities for people of all ages (58%). And roughly half think their libraries contribute “a lot” to their communities in terms of helping spark creativity among young people (49%) and providing a trusted place for people to learn about new technologies (47%) (Horrigan, 2016).



Discussions and Propositions

There are, however, obstacles to the public library being able to help forge literacy connections within their communities. One challenge is the availability of working parents/guardians to participate in such programs. The parents of children who most benefit from library programming, are typically working to support themselves and their family, making them unavailable during a midday storytime, or they may not be able to afford transportation costs to attend. Libraries must then bring the programming to them through community partnerships, book mobiles, and other outreach efforts. They must also offer flexible library programming that meets at times when working families can attend more often. This type of outreach and increase in programming will increase the social and economic opportunities of those in the community, but they require more funding for additional staff and service hours at night and on weekends.

Another challenge are “literacy deserts,” which are places where access to books (either retail or library-based) is extremely low. In 2001, a study found that middle-income-neighborhoods enjoyed a 13:1 ratio of books to children. In areas of concentrated poverty, that rate inverts to a staggering 1:300 (Neuman S. a., 2001). Public libraries (and their school library counterparts) offer a solution to this problem by providing books and materials access to the surrounding community. Expanded funding would allow for larger collections (including more copies of commonly used books) in addition to programs and services that provide literacy education and assistance at times and in places where more community members can best access them.

A third challenge is getting parents/guardians to be more involved in the early literacy process beyond attending programs. “Research consistently demonstrates that the more engaged a parent is in their child’s literacy before kindergarten, the more likely their child is to have success in school,” (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2017). In addition to the time and transportation required to access materials or services, low-income families also fear fines should they be unable to return materials on time (DePriest, 2017). Even small fines can create blocks on their accounts and strain already precarious financial budgets. The elimination of library fines may encourage parents and children to borrow more library items. Large library systems like Salt Lake City, have demonstrated that going fine-free increases library use and does not significantly impact library revenue. After going fine-free, Library Director Peter Bromberg said that, “checkouts were on the rise at Salt Lake City Public Library, and the number of new cardholders rose 3.5%. ‘Getting rid of fines brought new people into the library and allowed previous users to return,’” (The City Library, 2018). Bromberg goes on to describe that the number of library card holders went up by 26,000 in the first year, bringing in new users who previously balked at the idea of fines/fees for library materials. He also notes that the lack of late fees has not lead to a massive increase in material loss or theft since they still charge for lost items.



Discussions and Propositions

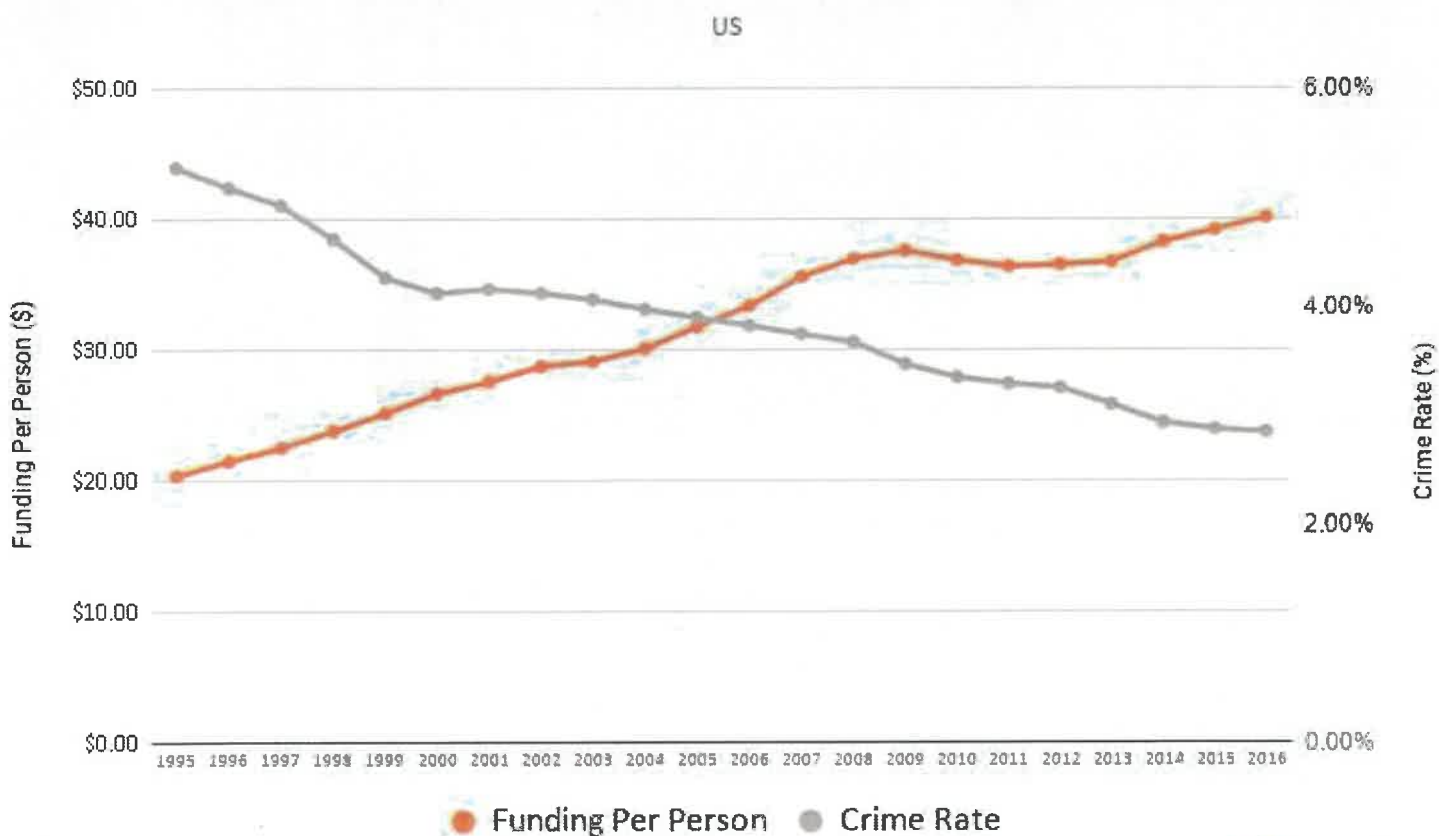
Yet another challenge is the need to vary methods and services that support the literacy needs of adults; often this requires partnerships with literacy organizations. For parents with young children, a literacy program designed to teach them missing literacy skills they can use with their kids might provide enough personal incentive for them to make the time to attend and study. Others, however, need a more structured and formal approach. One successful example, is a partnership between local libraries and LENA (Language ENvironment Analysis). Together they created a thirteen-week program that encouraged interaction between parents and their infant children as an early literacy strategy (LENA Team, 2018). Graduates of the program increased their usage of the public library and were even shown to be more actively involved in their local community. Because their local public libraries had the right materials and space to accommodate the program, they were able to support and engage the families long after it concluded.

While public libraries offer lifelong access to literacy materials, school libraries also play a key role part in addressing low literacy skills in the early grades. Studies have shown that interventions prior to third grade are far more effective than those after, and four studies have shown that increasing access to books can mitigate the effects of poverty on school achievement and literacy development (Hernandez, 2011; Krashen, 2011). In other words, the impact of access to books on school success is as strong or stronger than economic factors (Krashen, 2011). School libraries expand access to reading materials and integrate them throughout the school day. Properly funded and staffed school libraries working in conjunction with classroom teachers can provide their students with the levels of instruction, support, and nurturing necessary to establish foundational literacy skills that will impact students' academic and personal accomplishments throughout the rest of their lives.

Library Funding and Decreased Crime Rates

As Figure 1 indicates, the rise of overall library spending per person in the United States has accompanied a decline in the national crime rate. This correlation indicates that improved library funding leads to improved literacy skills, which ultimately creates more lawful economic opportunities. These parallel trends can also be seen at the state level. Increased literacy skills have been shown to directly influence high school graduation rates and chances of incarceration. One study estimates that even a 1% increase in the high school graduation rate would save the United States \$1.4 billion every year in reduced costs to victims and society (Lochner, 2004).

Figure 1: National Library Spending Per Person Correlated to National Crime Rates



A 2012 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) report found that trends of library funding and library usage mirror each other. “When [library funding] goes up, so does library usage. When [library funding] goes down, so does library usage, but by a lesser percentage. People still use libraries as much as conditions allow,” (Guion, 2017). By this rationale, the more funds libraries have, the more opportunities for their local community members to participate in educational activities and increase their literacy skills. The Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), have seen the correlation between library funding, literacy, and economic development and have adopted a resolution to increase federal funds to libraries to \$1 per person. According to COSLA, “one dollar per capita represents a doubling of current funding for the Grants to States program...[which] has remained essentially flat for more than 20 years despite rising costs to state library agencies and local libraries,” (COSLA, 2018). In essence they (and we) are saying, if per capita spending on libraries correlates with higher literacy, then congress should do its part to bring the federal portion of library funding up from pennies per person to just \$1 per person. In an effort to increase per-capita spending and equalize literacy services, the state of Illinois recently implemented the Illinois Public Library Per Capita and Equalization Aid grants program, which provides additional per-capita-based funding that helps equalize the availability of resources and materials across the state. An increase like this will provide significantly improved access to reading materials and literacy opportunities, especially in districts with higher levels of poverty. An increase to \$1 per person at the Federal funding level will dramatically increase access across the nation.



For those who question if spending \$1 a person is too significant a cost to spend on someone who has or is considering committing a crime, it is important to note that even when a low-literacy-skilled person doesn't enter into the criminal justice system they still cost government more than peers with high literacy skills. A lack of literacy skills costs the economy in terms of lost wages, un- or underemployment, job performance, and safety (The Literacy Center). Those with underdeveloped literacy and reading skills often incur additional healthcare costs due to their lack of comprehension of medical instructions and/or late interventions for medical conditions (Sessoms). These costs are significantly more expensive for taxpayers and consumers than the suggested increase in library funding.



Conclusion

Library funding is a community investment in better literacy skills. These improved literacy skills lead to better personal economic opportunities, a lower crime rate, and act as a full-throated rebuke of the one of the main causes of poverty. Public and school libraries provide literacy instruction and support infrastructure in nearly every community, but they require sufficient funding to be effective. The earlier a child can be reached with reading materials and interactive play, the better the chances of a good academic outcome. The addition of community-based adult literacy programs that can be facilitated at the public library ensure that no one is left behind.

If a rising tide lifts all ships, than creating opportunities to improve literacy for all individuals through access to reading materials, can be that tide that lifts people out of poverty and away from the criminal justice system. Studies strongly support the value of libraries as literacy providers and enablers as well how beneficial literacy is to both the individual and society. The cost of increasing library funding to enable literacy programs is insignificant when compared with the costs of incarceration. Library funding is an investment in the future and will help to improve economic opportunities and decrease rates of crime.



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