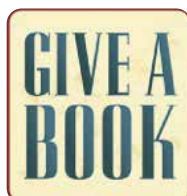
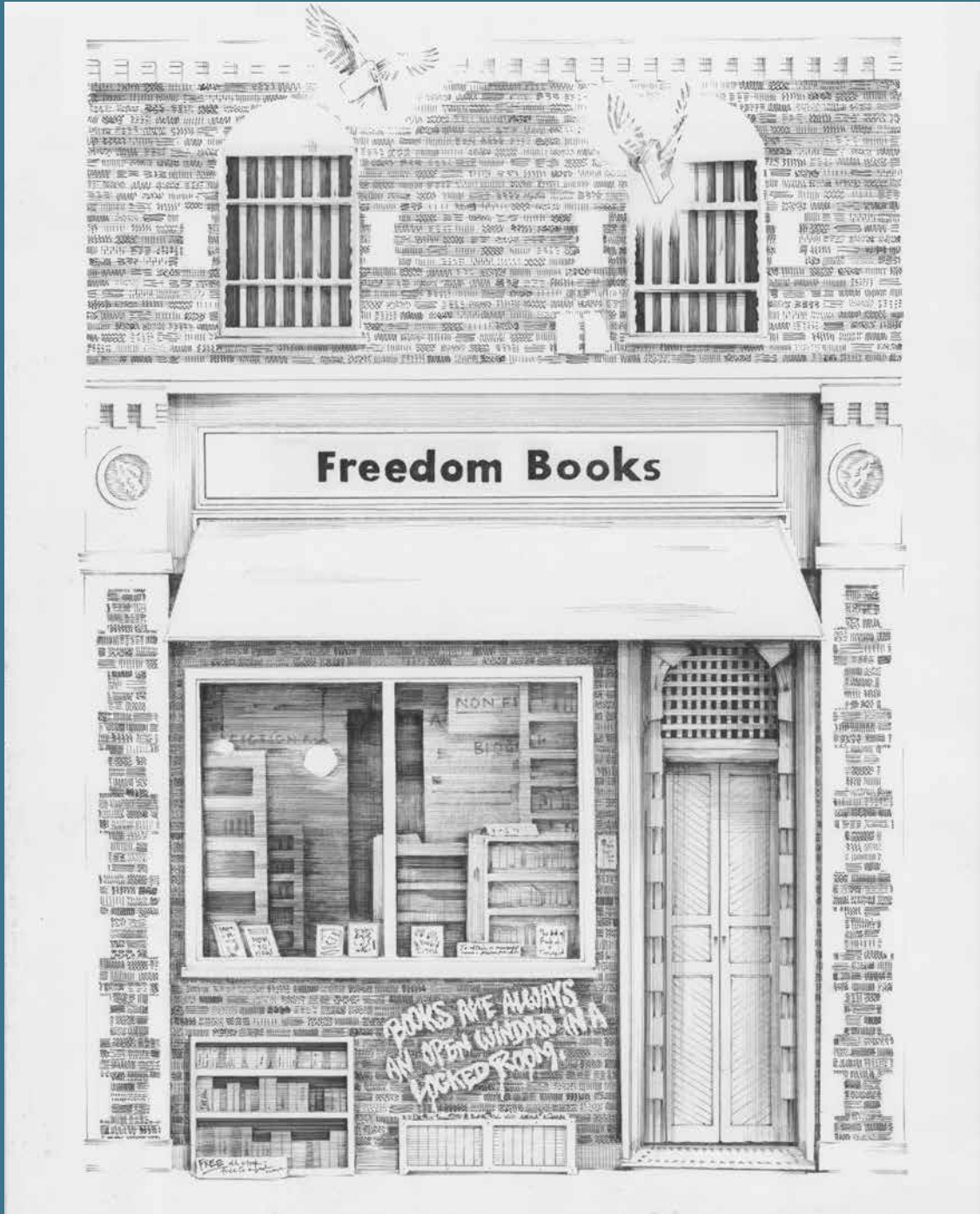


Community, connection and change: an evaluation and impact study of Prison Reading Groups

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Prison Reading Groups

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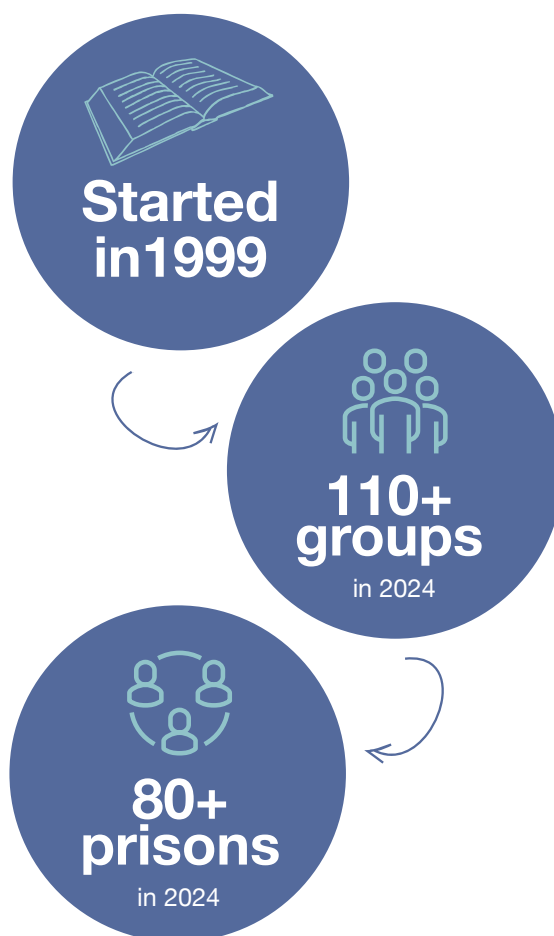
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Executive Summary

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) supports reading development in prisons through reading groups which are informal, voluntary and open-ended. PRG was established in 1999 and currently supports more than 110 groups in over 80 prisons nationwide.

The central objective of the evaluation was to identify what members most enjoy and value about the groups and to understand better the impact of reading groups on the lives of prisoner members.

Data was collected through surveys and focus groups with a qualitative emphasis that prioritised participant experience and interpretation. Five key themes were identified from the responses: becoming a reader; connections; wellbeing; confidence; widening horizons, challenge and change.



BECOMING A READER

Pleasure and ambition

The groups encourage participants to read more and to read more widely. They also increase the pleasure of reading by creating the opportunity for considered discussion and debate around books.

'I read 0 books before joining book club; I've now read 150 books in the past year.'

Choice and agency

Members value collective book choice. It creates a greater sense of agency and involvement and can model the benefits of democratic participation.

'You feel like you have a stake in the game.'



CONNECTIONS

Community

Participants view their reading groups as communities that draw like-minded prisoners together but can also encourage members to empathise and build relationships with people very different from themselves, both in the group and on the wing.

'I see myself as a more open-minded person who can relate to others.'

Purposeful activity

Members view the groups as purposeful and participation can strengthen or even catalyse involvement with other positive prison activities.

'I have become a more productive and functioning member of my community.'

Cementing family ties

The groups can help sustain existing ties with partners, children and wider family members.

'I enjoy showing my family how I am using my time in prison positively.'

Engagement with wider society

The groups attract prisoners with an existing interest in the world outside. They also encourage increased interest and provide a space for the exploration of social and political issues.

'It keeps us reminded that we are still part of a wider society than just the prison community.'

WELLBEING

Imaginative escape

Reading and membership of the group build reading pleasure through imaginative engagement which enables prisoners to combat the shrinking mental landscapes of prison.

'It takes me to a different place in my head.'

Safe space

Members feel safe in the group and better able to manage their mental health. The groups are also valued by neurodiverse prisoners.

'The book club has been a life-saver to me, without it I would be utterly lost.'

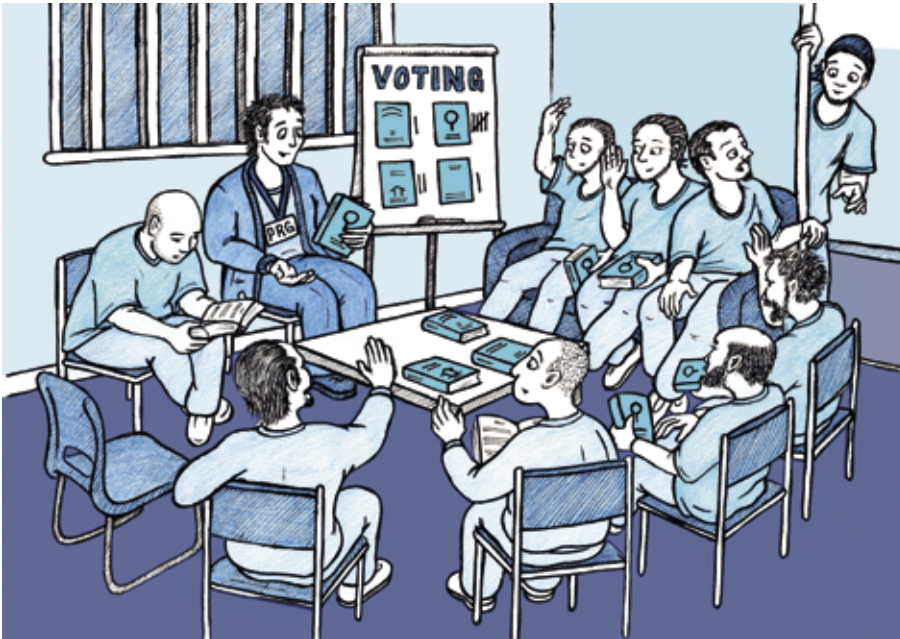
CONFIDENCE

The groups help members learn to shape and voice their responses and opinions, and to feel more confident about interacting with others, both inside and outside prison.

'It has made me more confident to explain my views and given me more belief in the validity of my opinion.'

WIDENING HORIZONS, CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

The groups challenge members and encourage them to think more deeply about what they read and about themselves. Participation improves self-esteem and helps prisoners develop a more productive sense of self.



The origins of Prison Reading Groups

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) was established in 1999 to set up, fund and support reading groups in prisons. It currently supports over 110 groups in more than 80 prisons nationwide and reaches approximately 2300 prisoner participants per year.

Groups are facilitated by library staff and/or PRG volunteers with support from prison officers or other staff. Participation is voluntary, there is no formal assessment and groups are ongoing rather than fixed-term. Prisoners join at any time and remain members for as long as they choose. Over 40 of the groups have been running for 2 years or more, over 20 for more than 5 years, and 5 have been going longer than 10 years.

The PRG model is flexible and groups are adapted to meet the needs of different target memberships and different prison regimes. The groups are open to all and many of them accommodate a wide range of reading experience and fluency among those who join. Most groups meet monthly for 1-2 hours with 6-10 participant members to discuss a book that the group has chosen and read in advance. PRG funding enables members to be given a new copy of the book to keep or pass on to others in the prison or to family outside.

In 2023 PRG launched Reading the Way, a new initiative to create informal groups specifically for prisoners who feel they struggle with reading and may not yet be confident enough to sign up for Education or join a regular reading group. The project is too new to be included in this evaluation but early feedback is promising. See Appendix 3.

PRG works across the prison estate: men's and women's prisons, public and private, high security and open conditions, remand prisons, resettlement prisons, foreign nationals prisons and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), as well as on mental health wings and a neurodiverse unit.

All the groups share core aims: to create community; to foster connections within the prison and outside; to prioritise choice and pleasure; to widen reading horizons, and to help prisoners develop a more positive sense of self.

PRG is part of registered charity Give a Book which is funded entirely by Trusts, Foundations and individual donations.





The Current Context

In March 2022 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted published a joint report, *Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons*. It drew attention to widespread low literacy in prisons and invoked the worrying estimate that 57% of prisoners who take initial assessments have literacy levels below those expected of a child leaving primary school.

The report was very critical of the type and quality of reading education it found in prisons. Although the focus of the report was largely on formal methods and courses, it also recognised the crucial role of pleasure in reading development.

‘Governors should lead a whole prison approach to reading that facilitates reading for pleasure, purpose and rehabilitation.’ (HMIP, Ofsted, 2022, Recommendations for Governors)

In June 2023 a follow-up report, *The quality of reading education in prisons: one year on*, criticised the overall rate of improvement and drew attention once again to ‘the importance of reading for pleasure as well as practical reasons. In our follow-up work, we have seen some examples of this taking place...but progress remains slow.’ (HMIP, Ofsted, 2023, Foreword)

The focus of this evaluation is on reading groups with members who are in general functionally literate though when they join some have never read a whole book before. It explores what these groups offer beyond ‘improving my reading’ and how they contribute to reading development, prisoner wellbeing and rehabilitation.

‘Reading is the common ground and for an hour or two I can indulge in ‘not being here’, talk without judgement and enjoy a good debate.’

Evaluation Findings

Rationale and approach

The evaluation was conceived to test and reflect on PRG's guiding aims as outlined above. The emphasis was on qualitative responses and the purpose was to capture participant voices and their interpretations and attitudes towards these aims.

Data was collected through written surveys for members and facilitators, and follow-up focus groups. The survey contained a mix of fact-finding questions that provided quantitative data and questions asking for a discursive response. The focus groups enabled surveyed participants to elaborate and develop their responses and to raise issues not covered by the surveys. Crucially, the focus groups also enabled prisoners less confident with writing and reading to contribute more fully.

15 groups from 13 prisons participated. 108 member surveys were returned and 19 from facilitators. Focus group data was gathered from 8 participant groups and 1 online group for facilitators.

For details of the methodology and a list of the survey questions see Appendix 1.

Five main themes emerged from the study:

1. [Becoming a reader](#)
2. [Connections](#)
3. [Wellbeing](#)
4. [Confidence](#)
5. [Widening horizons, challenge and change](#)



BECOMING A READER

“Not a book I would have picked up” should be the unofficial banner of the reading group.’

We read for different reasons at different times: for information and instruction; for distraction and escape; for comfort and consolation; for self-improvement, and to practise the skill. Reading groups add another dimension: they enable critical sociability, a space in which to share enjoyment, and to test out responses and judgements.

Building reading and discussion skills

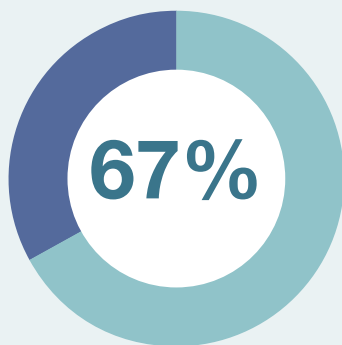
Why do members join the groups? The survey responses focused largely on their ambitions to read more and to read more widely. More than two-thirds reported reading more since joining the group and over half read more widely and/or with greater enjoyment.

For more detail about what groups read, see Appendix 2.

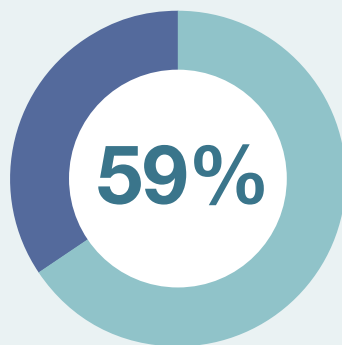


‘My horizons have been broadened bringing variety to my reading.’

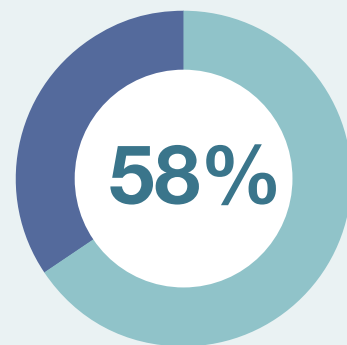
Since joining the group...



reported that they read more



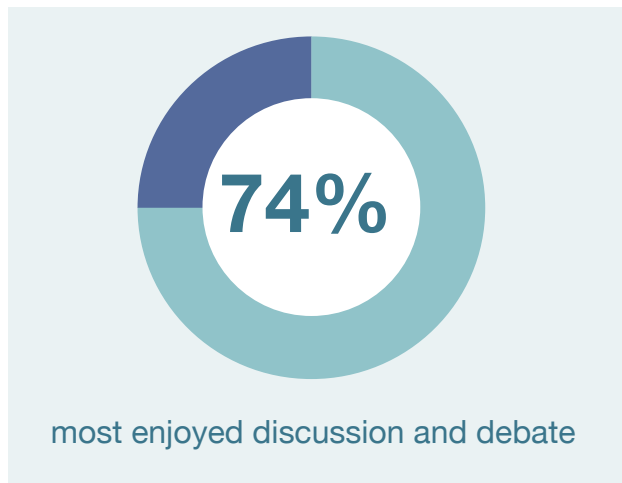
reported that they read more widely



reported that they read with greater enjoyment

‘Historical fiction is a genre I did not know existed. Thanks to PRG I am ordering them incessantly.’

In answer to what they enjoyed most about their group, 74% of participants highlighted discussion, debate and conversation with a purpose. It was noticeable that there was as much emphasis on listening as on speaking: 'listening to what other people thought', 'hearing what other people have to say', 'sharing different ideas about a book', 'the respectful debating', 'the exchange of points of view'. These are high-level skills and the groups provide a space where they can be practised and honed.



'Prison conversation from day to day can be limited. We call it prison dyslexia, the loss of the ability to articulate because day to day convo is mundane. Book club allows the exercise of mental muscles that would otherwise weaken.'

The life of a book

PRG members receive new copies of their chosen books to keep or pass on. In response to a survey question about whether getting a book to keep is important, well over half said yes.

Comments revealed a range of uses. Some participants display the books proudly on a shelf in their cell, examples of cultural capital as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu and others. The books provide concrete evidence of participation in an activity that is valued in society outside. They may also be a bold show of commitment in an environment where books and reading are not universally respected.

Facilitators echoed these views.

'For some of these guys who have never owned anything in their life, they now own 7 books because they've attended 7 book clubs. I think that's really meaningful.'

'I keep them all as a collection. It is a positive in a negative environment.'



And in a place where the surroundings and physical objects prisoners see and use daily are mostly dirty and often broken, a new book can have far-reaching effects.

'A clean copy makes me feel I have some ownership of my opinions.'

'Yes, it's important that something becomes 'yours'. It helps engender a sense that you have value as an individual.'

PRG books may also have lives off the shelf. Some members give their copies to others on the wing so the books circulate and create wider conversations. They also find their way to segregation units and first-nighter wings. Prisoners report sending their books to family members, especially copies that have been signed by the author at a PRG event. The exchange and what members say about it shows how a book as gift can create a sense of reciprocity and make the giver an active agent of reading promotion. And this is especially true for prisoners, who rarely have anything to give to their family.

'My mum enjoys a read. I chat about the books with her. Once I was able to have a book she enjoyed signed for/to her by the author. I felt good being able to gift that to her'

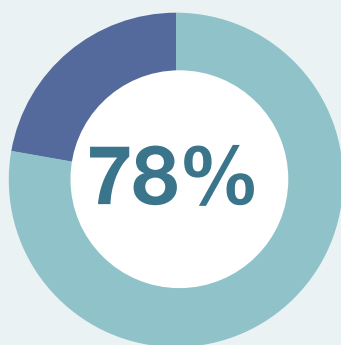
CONNECTIONS

‘Being in prison is quite solitary for most people. The group gives us a different (more open) perspective.’

The group as a community

Isolation is one of the most difficult challenges faced by those in prison. Despite widespread over-crowding, prisoners are cut off – from family, friends, work, the outside world. As a result, they are also in danger of becoming cut off from their sense of self. As one member of a group outside the study put it: ‘Without contact with other people you start to lose yourself’. This can lead to damaging effects on mental health inside and make re-integration after release more difficult (Behan, 2015, p.7).

The reading groups create supportive communities that help prisoners combat these dangers. Almost 4 out of 5 member participants viewed their reading group as a community. Some of those who had been coming for less than 6 months were still tentative and saw community development as a process: ‘too early to tell’, ‘I think I am beginning to, it might take a few months’. This highlights the importance of one of the guiding principles of PRG. Unlike many other reading initiatives in prison, our groups are ongoing rather than fixed-term because both becoming a reader and building relationships take time.



considered their group to be a community

‘It makes me understand other people’s personalities where I’ve never really taken the time to get to know.’



Much has been written about the power of books to increase empathy, the ability to understand and share the experience of others through imaginative involvement. Didier Fassin suggests that prison often leads to what he calls ‘a dulling of affect, particularly of the sympathy [prisoners] might feel for others.’ (Fassin, 2017, p.112). Our groups foster empathy through both reading and sharing responses with one another. Many of the comments in our survey emphasised the way the group helped prisoners to connect with each other and build empathy through exploration of difference.

‘In here you are thrown together with complete strangers, and you are trying to find common ground with people from different backgrounds. We didn’t know each other before the group but we have now created friendships.’



One sign of this community-building is that groups sometimes create names for themselves – ‘Leviathans’, ‘Bookworms Club’, ‘Nelson’s Parrot Book Club.’ One group even designs and produces its own bookmarks.

The mutual support of members helps groups bond and builds reading confidence and pleasure for more hesitant readers. This was strongly confirmed by facilitators in the focus group.

“The other day there was someone who read aloud for the first time and they were all so proud of him as a group, as a community. They were just really excited for him, that he had taken that first step.”

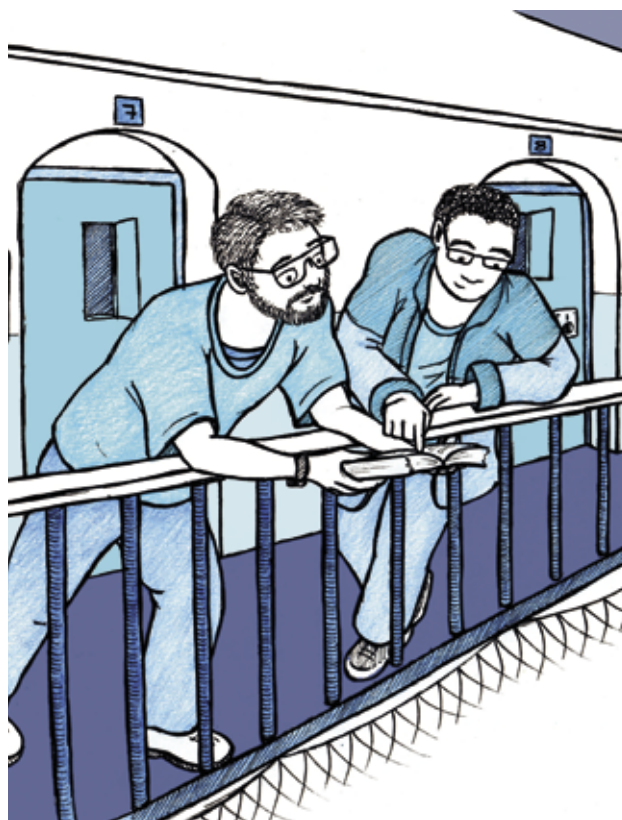
This is in stark contrast to the fearful attitudes to formal education that Helen Nichols identified in some prisoners: ‘a fear of failure in the presence of others and as such the classroom becomes a place to be actively avoided’ (Nichols, 2021, p.76). The supportive bonds of the reading group can help overcome this anxiety and perhaps make prisoners readier to engage with education classes.

Sociability on the wing

The connection and sociability of the groups extend beyond the meeting space to the wing where members enjoy acknowledging each other and continuing their conversations about the books.



‘I see someone from the group on the wing and we give each other [mimes a thumbs up gesture].’



‘Around the wings they comment, ‘Oh, I’ve been reading Chapter 3 and this is what happens. Where are you at?’ So it’s that sense of belonging, security and support that’s really important’ – Librarian

The officer in the facilitator focus group suggested that this sociability also makes the wings safer places.

‘I think that reading groups can have a serious impact on not just rehabilitation but the safety and security of the wing...Instead of being on the wing doing things that are negative and talking absolute rubbish, you focus your time on something that can build back your life.’ – Officer

Involvement in wider prison life

There is wide agreement that becoming involved in purposeful activity, 'doing things' and 'keeping busy', can combat isolation and help prisoners develop a sense of agency and control.

78% of member respondents reported that they were involved in other prison activities alongside the reading group, including work, education and volunteering.



This suggests that reading groups are part of a larger set of opportunities taken up by those trying to move towards change. Six respondents specifically mentioned that the group had been a catalyst for further activities and responsibilities within the prison community. Comments like these also confirm the importance that Shadd Maruna and others put on prisoners being able to see themselves as positive contributors to their social worlds (Maruna, 2001).

'I have put forward to be a Shannon Trust mentor and the library orderly. So yes, the group has been very helpful.'

'[I have become] a more productive and functioning member of my community.'



Bringing the outside in: volunteers

Volunteers bring the outside world into the prison. A 2016 Clinks User Voice report highlighted the qualities that surveyed prisoners valued in volunteers. These included 'independence', 'understanding and listening', 'trust', 'compassion' and 'sympathy'. Volunteers model the pleasure and value of pro-social participation that prisoners can work towards in their own volunteering activities inside.

Of our survey respondents, 82 were in groups facilitated by volunteers. Three quarters of these agreed that volunteers make a difference, and their comments confirmed the Clinks findings about what prisoners value about them.



'It's nice to have someone from outside the prison walls, just a voice from the outside makes a huge difference.'

'[Our volunteer] brings knowledge, civility and calm into a place that struggles to be any of these things.'



Bringing the outside in: author visits

Many PRG groups arrange author visits which help members feel connected and validated as a community of readers. In the last 14 months visiting writers have included Simon Callow, Mick Herron, Jonathan Freedland, Simon Armitage and Gary Younge. The feedback from Gary Younge's visit for Black History Month in 2023 made this clear: 'super-informative and interesting. I learned a lot'; '[I enjoyed] having a seasoned journalist in a small setting give insights on very important topics in society that affect us all'.

For prisons, author visits provide positive publicity and they are generally welcomed by Governors.

'It was very obvious during the event how much the prisoners were getting from it and Gary Younge gave us all a great deal to think about – what a brilliant example of encouraging everyone to respect each other and learn from history.' – Head of Reducing Re-offending

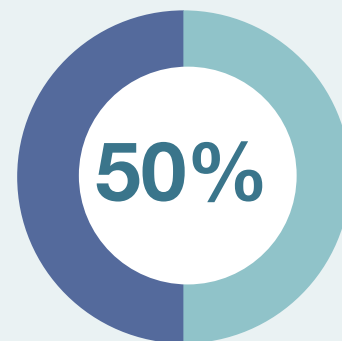


Connecting with the wider world

By definition, prisoners are cut off from wider society and this can lead to a loss of interest in it. But if prisoners are to become active citizens after release, they need to feel that the world outside matters and that they have a stake in it. This is why many prison reformers argue that prisoners should have the vote. But even without it, those inside need to be engaged with the wider world. Cormac Behan argues that 'the connections that bind us together' are the core of all meaningful citizenship and need to be fostered in prison by providing 'opportunities for those inside to participate in their community and stay connected with society outside' (Behan, 2015, p.1). Reading, discussion and debate are forms of participation that connect members with the wider world and the issues faced by society and its citizens.

In the survey, prisoners were asked if being in the group made them feel more interested in wider social or political issues. Half said yes. Of those who said no, 4 commented that they were already interested when they joined, and this may also have been true of other 'no' responses.

'Yes, we have discussions which extend to political and topical issues like the presentation of women and ethnicity, the legacy of slavery, the politics of the culture wars'



said the group made them more interested in the wider world

'It gives you the feeling that you are a member of society.'

Connecting with family

The crucial importance of family ties for prisoner well-being and rehabilitation is now universally recognised. The Farmer Report in 2017 described healthy family relationships as the ‘golden thread’ needed to reduce re-offending and inter-generational crime. In 2021 a research report by HM Inspectorate of Probation concluded that contact with family can ‘encourage self-belief and engender hope in the possibility of change’ (HMIP, 2021, Summary of Evidence).

PRG runs a range of projects to connect prisoners with their families through books. These include support for Family Days with specially chosen books for prisoners to gift to visiting children, and volunteers to support family reading on the day; also a library-based initiative called Raising Readers that encourages prisoner parents to choose a book to be sent home, with a book plate to gift it and a second copy for the parent to keep and read with the child over the phone or in a video call.

Responses to the survey question about the group helping to connect with family were mixed. 43 respondents said yes, 3 said ‘not yet’ and 1 answered ‘not sure’. 44 said no, and 6 volunteered that they had no contact with family. 11 did not reply or wrote ‘n/a’.

The data is not conclusive but it suggests that while the reading groups may not easily overcome complete estrangement, they can help sustain family bonds.



Comments about family uses of books and book talk were varied, from breaking the ice in a phone call to providing loved ones with evidence of time well spent inside.

‘I enjoy showing my family how I am using my time in prison positively.’

‘My partner reads a lot and now we have more to talk about.’

‘I don’t want to give up reading after this. My mum thanked me for reading again – she got the audio book to read along with me.’



One member put his reading group and family in playful rivalry which suggests the value he placed on both.

‘I have moved my family’s visiting day for the book club... they weren’t impressed!’

‘We had a lady whose husband was a long-distance lorry driver and he was avidly listening to the books that we were reading in the group. Sometimes she would phone him and he would say ‘No, I can’t speak to you at the moment. I’m listening to the book.’ Then she would have to phone him after the meeting every month and tell him what we thought of it.’ – Library facilitator

WELLBEING

'Books are always an open window in a locked room.' – Ali Smith

Reading as escape

Escape is an ambiguous word, especially in the context of prison. It can have connotations of 'escapism', implying avoidance, a desire to ignore present responsibilities and take refuge in unreality. The boredom and bleakness of the prison environment can also lead to a shrinking mental world where the prisoner becomes trapped in the stultifying daily round of prison life. In this context, the escape offered by books can be a powerful antidote, opening up thoughts and feelings and expanding the capacity to imagine other possibilities and ways of being. Some of the survey responses emphasised the value of being alone with a book, away from the noise and numbing distractions of the wing.



'Reading without distraction can be very therapeutic. I look forward to going back to my cell. It can be a haven from the rest of your life.'

The group as a safe space

While private reading can expand the imagination, the solitude of the cell can be difficult and may precipitate or exacerbate anxiety, depression and self-harm. In September 2024 HMIP published *Purposeful prisons: time out of cell*, a Key Findings paper based on prisoner responses to their very limited time out of cell. 'Our findings identified a troubling picture regarding the impact of poor time out of cell. Frequently, prisoners told us of the detrimental effects of excessive periods locked up on their mental and physical health.' The report goes on to quote prisoner views directly: 'We're not getting enough time out of our cells. It's worse than covid sometimes. Self-harm is up and alcohol consumption is through the roof due to bang up.' (HMIP, 2024, p.7)

PRG groups encourage the pleasure and challenge of private reading but also the prospect of exchanging the cramped confinement of the cell with meeting as a group to share experiences of the book. This is enhanced where members can meet in the library, a rare space that is generally bright, clean and welcoming. As many people – prisoners and visitors alike – comment: 'It's the one place in the prison that doesn't feel like a prison'.

'[It's] a calm escape where I can meet like-minded people and have a restful and reflective time.'

What survey respondents most highlighted was the importance of the group as a safe space where members feel at ease and can better manage anxiety and depression.

'The book club has been a life-saver to me, without it I would be utterly lost.'

The reading groups build powerful bonds of trust. Facilitators report that when an extract is being read aloud in turns, more experienced readers will often provide tactful support to more hesitant ones. And members who share cells sometimes read aloud to each other to keep up their reading momentum between meetings.

CONFIDENCE

This trust takes time to build and members can become very protective. One male member described the group as 'a tribe'. There may have been playfulness in this but in one of the women's focus groups, real concern was expressed about allowing in people who might disrupt the close-knit harmony that had been achieved.

'When a prisoner asks about the group, I become quite protective.'

By contrast, one of the participants in the facilitators' focus group commented on the way the women in her group sometimes brought new prisoners to the meetings to help them settle in.

'We've had women arrive and on the day they arrive, be dragged into the reading group because it's that night and then they just stay. And you know, that's your introduction to life in a prison then. That's great, isn't it?' – Librarian

The views expressed here could point to gender-based differences worth pursuing in future work. In any case, they highlight the delicate balance that needs to be found in any group between a safe space and one that is welcoming and inclusive.



There was no specific question in the surveys about increased confidence but it was cited frequently as one of the major benefits and pleasures of the group: confidence to take on the challenge of reading; confidence to engage with other people inside and outside the group; confidence to formulate and express opinions.

'I am more confident, I can speak my mind more and I matter.'

'I have grown in confidence as I didn't really have a voice due to an abusive partner.'

Prisons are particularly challenging for neurodiverse people and PRG runs a targeted group in a prison with a designated neurodiversity wing. Members in our regular groups also quite often identify themselves as neurodiverse and talk openly of the difficulties that prisons present, particularly in relation to noise, close proximity to other people and the unpredictability of scheduled activities. In a recent discussion one of the members in a group outside the study explained: 'Being in this room now, so close to other people, is very hard for me – it feels like sensory overload and makes me anxious.' [But you're here now?] 'Yes, because I know I need to make more connections - and I have.'

One of the survey participants identified himself as autistic and wrote even more positively about the support of the group:

'I am now confident expressing my opinion and being in a group. I'm autistic and have social anxiety so groups scare me, but book group is a relaxed environment and we all share the common interest.'

Participants also drew attention to the usefulness of the group in preparing them to negotiate situations outside prison. This was heartening evidence of future orientation and preparing for life after prison.

'In a social situation it's easier to talk to people – I can talk more and my tics have decreased since I first started. I am less nervous which could be helpful in future job interviews or in situations like going to the bank.'

WIDENING HORIZONS, CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

Structure and purpose

Members commented on the discipline of the group: reading the book in advance, sometimes more than once, and perhaps making written notes and conversation points for the session to come. Respondents also referred to how the groups had helped them express themselves with greater clarity and precision, and had challenged them to think more sharply.

'Having to voice opinions in front of a group means I focus on distilling the essence of my opinions.'

'Knowing I will be sharing my opinion makes me really focus.'

The previously-cited *Purposeful prisons* report refers to the frustration and increased anxiety that prisoners experience as a result of the perceived lack of consistency in their prison's daily regime. For reading group members, a reliable scheduled date and time for the next meeting, even if several weeks away, can provide structure and goals to combat this.

'I wanted to convince myself that I was capable of completing a book in a given time period.'

'It motivates me.'

'It gives you something to look forward to and some structure to the month.'



Choice and agency

Many studies confirm the crucial importance of a sense of autonomy for successful desistance and rehabilitation. But prisons are largely places of disempowerment and in general prisoners have very little choice or control over anything.

Choice is central to PRG groups: the choice to attend; a say in how the group is run, and choice about what the group reads. These choices carry real significance not only for becoming a reader but also for the feeling of agency that prisoners need to help them turn their lives around.

'You feel like you have a stake in the game.'

'It creates more willingness to participate.'

Members are encouraged to come to the group meetings with recommendations, and volunteers usually bring a range of singleton copies to provide further possibilities – fiction and non-fiction, popular genres and literary novels, short stories and epic narratives, poetry as well as prose. Time is made available during the session for members to look at the books, read the blurbs and sometimes the opening paragraphs of ones that look interesting. Where groups take place in the library members can browse the shelves and bring over books for others to look at. Groups have different methods for choosing: some aim for consensus but many have a formal system of nomination and voting. This can give members experience of the value of democratic process and participation and over 70% of survey participants affirmed that choice is important.

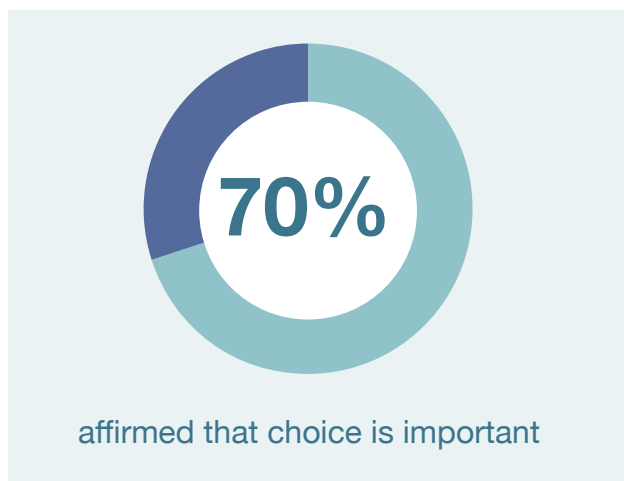
'[Voting] gives you real ownership of the book choice.'



Choice also encourages reading ambition and engagement with new ideas and attitudes. Members commented on how their wider reading in the group made them more aware of different world views and attitudes among group members as well as in the books they read.

'[Other] members often ask questions that hadn't occurred to me. I find that fascinating.'

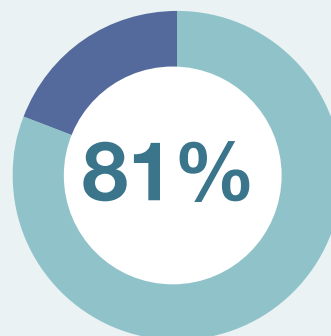
'I try to think more about the author and their intentions.'



Change

In addition to the frequent references throughout the survey responses to increased confidence, there was also evidence of a deepened capacity for reflection and self-reflection, and a growing sense of self-worth. The survey included a question about whether being in the group had made participants think more deeply about what they read. 81% answered yes, the highest number for any of the responses to questions about changed reading habits.

'I never saw myself as a reader of books and am now proud to think that I am and recognise how this has helped to expand my horizons and myself.'



said they thought more deeply about what they read

'Yes, the book club has made me a deeper thinker so in many ways every day I see life different because of it.'

The final question of the survey asked 'Has being in the group changed the way you see yourself?' 44% (48/108) answered yes, a response rate that may point to well-judged reluctance to attribute radical transformation to a single activity. But the comments revealed very positive shifts. Some observed outwardly measurable change.

'I've expanded my capacity to learn.'

Others stressed increased recognition of positive aspects of themselves:

'It has reminded me who I am.'

'I can see myself improving myself.'

Overall, the evaluation provided valuable confirmation of how reading and PRG reading groups can help prisoners develop a more positive and productive sense of self.

CHALLENGES

PRG is proud of its contribution to reading development in prisons and our evaluation confirms the value of what we do to promote pleasure, purpose, connection and change, all of which are central both to becoming a reader and to the process of rehabilitation. However, we face significant challenges.

Stability and expansion

One of the difficulties is increasing turnover and churn of prison populations. Rises in remand prisoners, short sentences and transfers have resulted in shorter lengths of time in the group and this has an effect on the ability of members to settle, form relationships and consolidate their reading habits.

Table with survey results for length of membership:

| | |
|----------------------|--------|
| 1–3 months | 54/108 |
| 4–6 months | 19/108 |
| 7–12 months | 16/108 |
| 13 + months | 16/108 |
| Unknown or no answer | 3/108 |

In response, some PRG groups have moved to a drop-in, read aloud model that makes every meeting self-contained. PRG facilitators also encourage prisoners who are being transferred to make early contact with their new library and find out if there's a reading group to join. If not, we advise them to suggest that the library staff get in touch with PRG through the website for support to start one. Members who have been in other PRG groups report that having a group to join when they arrived made the transition easier and gave them confidence about meeting and interacting with new people.

A recent letter from a PRG member who had been transferred elsewhere confirmed the appetite that our reading groups can create.

'This is George from HMP _____, now moved to HMP _____. Thanks for setting up the wonderful group at _____. This is just a quick note to ask is there any chance PRG could set up a group here? As far as I've been able to tell, there's nothing of the sort here unfortunately.'

PRG group numbers have increased dramatically in the last two years. Since the Ofsted / HMIP reports of 2022 and 2023, prisons have been required to create a reading strategy that includes a focus on reading for pleasure as well as practical purposes. One result has been a dramatic increase in requests from prisons for new reading groups. In the course of 2023, the number of groups we ran almost doubled, from 48 to 84. And numbers continue to rise.

| | |
|------|----------------|
| 2022 | 48 PRG groups |
| 2023 | 84 PRG groups |
| 2024 | 113 PRG groups |

Prison support

The expansion of our group numbers is encouraging but sustaining them can be difficult. Purposeful activity in prisons has been curtailed by the increasing challenges across the estate: over-crowding, churn, short-staffing and violence, all of which make prisoner movement, access and association more difficult.

In 2018 Lord Ramsbotham reported to the Parliamentary All-Party Group on Penal Affairs that the voluntary sector was responsible for at least 50% of the rehabilitation work in prisons (Prison Reform Trust, Minutes of the APPG, January, 2018). More recently, the Ofsted/HMIP reports of 2022 and 2023 acknowledged the heavy reliance on voluntary sector organisations to provide crucial elements of reading education and development. But in our experience, voluntary sector services and initiatives that are not seen as 'core provisions' are the worst affected by problems at every level. Some prisons have directories of voluntary organisations working in the prison but these seem to have limited impact on awareness and support.

Many of our groups feel very precarious. Facilitators report cancellations because of frequent incorrect role counts or because wing officers have not been alerted to the scheduled meeting or are unwilling/unable to provide unlock and escort. In one of our prisons, there were 6/11 cancellations of the monthly meeting in 2024.

Libraries and meeting rooms

The library is the crucial centre for promoting reading and reading activities throughout the prison and the place where many PRG groups meet. In general libraries are bright and welcoming spaces and the lift they give to the meetings is noticeable, making members more respectful of their surroundings and of each other.

But access to libraries has become increasingly restricted and some are much less accessible than the gym. There is sometimes little promotion or even awareness of the library. A PRG volunteer who arrived with a bag of books explained to the security officer on duty that she had come for the reading group in the library. The officer didn't know there was a library in the prison and asked if he would be allowed to join and borrow books. At another prison the librarian asked at a staff briefing for a show of hands from those who had never visited the library. The forest of raised arms included the No.1 Governor.

A room on the wing is the alternative for some PRG groups but these are scarce and often double-booked. Many of them are also very small, cramped, noisy and dirty, with insufficient and broken chairs or sagging and smelly sofas.

Security clearance for volunteers

Security clearance for volunteers is often slow and cumbersome and the officers in charge are not always helpful. The forms are not straightforward and the format requirements for ID may require applicants who use online banking to make a trip to their bank for hard-copy statements. After a long wait, a recent application was queried on the grounds that the volunteer had declared herself married but also stated she had not had a change of name. Another application took so long that the applicant had moved and had to submit a new form. Long waits for clearance sometimes result in withdrawal by the volunteer.

Book deliveries

The funds that PRG and Give a Book raise allow groups to choose what they read and to receive new copies of the chosen book to keep or pass on to others on the wing. These books are ordered from authorised suppliers and addressed to the designated inside contact at the prison. Much too often the books are lost somewhere between the gate and the addressee. Sometimes the gate refuses to take delivery, which means the books are sent back and PRG must pay for them to be re-delivered. Or the books may simply go missing, even when they have been signed for. Chasing them is expensive and time-consuming for PRG and for our inside contacts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

High level support from the prison

The awareness and support of Governors and senior managers are invaluable. A visit to the group from the Governor or the Education, Skills and Work (ESW) lead can build self-esteem among members and allows managers to see firsthand what the group achieves.

'I have interacted with people I otherwise wouldn't, including the governor who read out a poem I wrote as part of Book Club.'

'Prison Reading Groups (PRG) are a fantastic asset to our community. The regular meetings bring structure and excitement, with surprise topics sparking engaging and thought-provoking discussions. The groups build confidence, connection, and a true sense of achievement among members.' – Governor

Integration into prison reading strategies and teams

Reading strategies are now a requirement in all prisons. In our view the most effective ones are those which have a team that meets regularly and includes senior managers and representatives of reading-focused voluntary sector organisations working in the prison. This enables more collaborative planning and delivery of initiatives and gives voluntary organisations a higher profile across the prison. Teams that are expected to include for example PRG and the Shannon Trust as well as the education provider and the library would make it easier to identify readers (or non-readers) who would most enjoy and benefit from a reading group.

Recognising and rewarding reading groups as purposeful activity

In the focus group discussions some participants reported that attendance at the reading group meant forfeiting payment for work or education or in some cases risking their job. Since most groups meet only once a month, continued payment for workers who attend would not be costly and would confirm the value of the group within the prison.

Whole prison reading culture

The 2022 Ofsted/HMIP report recommended that 'Governors should lead a whole prison approach to reading that facilitates reading for pleasure, purpose and rehabilitation'. Give a Book and PRG are implementing this through a 3-year funded initiative at HMP Isis, managed by a prison reading specialist. The project includes reading groups on each house block, the introduction of book stock chosen by the young men for special new bookshelves on each wing, and the start of family reading initiatives and celebratory events. The project is in its second year and not yet fully evaluated but feedback from both staff and prisoners is very promising.

'Each group thanked us for the events – one said 'I've been in jail since I was 14. I'm 18 now and I've never had nothing like this afternoon. Thank you'.'

Involvement of assigned officers

Where they currently exist, officers with specific responsibility for supporting the library and promoting reading throughout the prison can make a significant contribution. This should be a designated role in all prisons and should include training for the officer and practical support for outside organisations as part of the role: acting as named contact; sourcing a space; help with recruitment, sign-up lists and reminders; ensuring escort and perhaps even reading the books and participating in discussions. This would let officers see the value of the groups and help build productive bonds between staff and prisoners.

It is encouraging that CILIP, the library and information association, and Arts Council England (ACE) have been working on a joint project to develop a training package for new officers to help them better understand the benefits of prison libraries. It is to be hoped that this will encourage more officers to become involved with book-related responsibilities. Feedback to PRG highlights the benefits for both officers and prisoners.

‘Being able to facilitate the reading group has been one of the highlights of my working in prison...There aren’t many activities that the men will jump out of bed to come join but I was always met with enthusiasm when I unlocked for the sessions. I have had men approaching me when I was handing out the reminder slips asking if their friends or cellmates could join in after having spoken highly of the group on the landings.’ – Officer

‘I met Officer A on my first library visit and he really engaged with me. He wished me well and wished me luck for my time inside. It changed my perspective on how I might be treated by officers...I was invited to book club – the way it is set up is marvellous. Officer A is fully involved, reads the books, contributes and makes every person there feel valued.’ – from a prisoner nomination letter for an Outstanding Officer Award

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: METHODOLOGY

Application was made to the National Research Council (NRC) for approval for the study, with a required additional application to the Serco Research Ethics Committee for the private prison we included. Once approval was granted we secured written permission from the Governors of all the prisons involved and agreement to participate from all the library contacts and volunteer facilitators.

Surveys were sent to 15 PRG groups in 13 prisons. Facilitators were sent guidance notes to explain the purpose of the surveys and members received written information which was also read out to them. Consent forms were signed by both facilitators and members. 108 surveys were returned from members and 19 from facilitators.

Four groups were facilitated by library staff, 5 by volunteer(s), 5 by a combination of volunteer(s) and library staff, and 1 by a combination of volunteers and officer. We ran focus groups in 8 prisons, where members could talk in more detail about the topics covered in the survey as well as offer additional comments about their reading and reading group experience. We were not able to record the member discussions but a note-taker was present to summarise the points made and to transcribe verbatim memorable remarks. For the list of prisons, see below.

We ran a separate focus group online via Teams for 5 PRG facilitators, including library staff, volunteers and one officer facilitator. The session was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

NVivo 14 was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the anonymised survey responses from members and facilitators, notes from the focus groups held in prisons, and the transcript of the online focus group.

1. Fact finding
2. Wellbeing, quality of life, connection to the outside world
3. Becoming a reader, social participation
4. Identity and sense of self
5. Free space for comments

The survey questions are reproduced in full below.

Constraints of the study

The primary constraint was time. The approval process took 4 months, which ate into the overall budget of the project and limited the researcher's time to travel and conduct focus groups within the allotted project period.

The study was also limited by the restricted time and conditions available for administering the survey and conducting the focus groups. Both had to take place during scheduled reading group meetings. Facilitators were reluctant to give over a full session to either so for most groups the time allocated for each was only about 30 minutes, which included an explanation of the research, reading the information sheet and signing the consent forms.

We kept the surveys short and with a balance of questions asking for factual information or yes/no answers and those inviting a discursive response. We did not ask specific questions about responses to individual books both because of time constraints and because the meaning-making of reading groups mostly takes place in the course of group discussion which we could not record.

With all our reading groups PRG asks facilitators for written feedback from each meeting. This has created a rich source of evidence for the ways in which books and reading group discussion can encourage empathy, productive debate and engagement with the wider world. The analysis of this information would require a different kind of study, which we hope to undertake in the future.

The report is also informed by a literature review of reading and reading groups in prisons, the benefits of reading for pleasure and a review of historic PRG feedback. All works consulted are included in the bibliography. Particularly relevant studies were those by Billington (2011), Robinson (2012) and Liebling et al (2022). These are evaluations focussed largely on the therapeutic benefits of a specific model of read aloud groups with material chosen by the facilitator. There is considerable overlap of the benefits confirmed in our study but they also helped us highlight the distinctive elements of PRG's principles and methods.

What the evaluation provided, above all, was the opportunity for prisoner voice to play a prominent role. The discursive interpretation and elaboration of the themes by participants has given us richer insights into what members enjoy and value about their groups.

List of prisons

The participating prisons included both men's and women's establishments.

| Prison | Population | Category | Location |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------|-------------|
| HMP Brixton | adult male | C, D | London |
| HMP Bullingdon | adult male and 18-21 | B, C | Oxfordshire |
| HMP Bure | adult male | C | Norfolk |
| HMP Downview | women | | Surrey |
| HMP East Sutton Park | women | | Kent |
| HMP High Down | adult male | B | Surrey |
| HMP Lewes | adult male | B, C, D | East Sussex |
| HMP Maidstone | foreign nationals | C | Kent |
| HMP Pentonville | adult male and 18-21 | B, C, D | London |
| HMP Rochester | adult male and 18-21 | C | Kent |
| HMP Thameside | adult male and 18-21 | B | London |
| HMP Wandsworth | adult male and 18-21 | B, C | London |
| HMP Wormwood Scrubs | adult male and 18-21 | B, C, D | London |

Survey questions

Member survey

- How did you hear about the group?
- Why did you join the group?
- How long have you been coming to the group?
- What do you most enjoy about the reading group?
- Does being in the group make you feel more connected with other people, for example, other group members, people elsewhere in the prison or outside? If so, how?
- Does being in the group help you connect with your family? If so, how?
- Does being in the group make you feel more interested in wider social and/or political issues?
- Do you view the group as a 'community'?
- If your group is run by a volunteer, does having someone from outside the prison make a difference?
- Before joining the group how often did you read for pleasure: often, not very often, never?
- Since joining do you read more: yes, no, about the same?
- Do you enjoy reading more? If so, why?
- Do you read more widely? If so, can you give examples?
- Has being in the group made you think more deeply about the books you read and your responses to them?
- Is it important that the group decides what book to read? If so, why?
- Is it important that you get new copies of the book to keep? If so, why?
- Before you joined the group were you involved in other prison activities, for example, education courses, or as a Shannon Trust mentor, a Listener, a wing rep, a library orderly, or other? If so, which activities?
- Has being in the group changed the way you see yourself? If so, how?
- Free space for your comments

Survey questions

Facilitator survey

- Your prison
- Your role (eg library staff, volunteer, officer)
- How did you hear about PRG?
- How long has your group been running?
- Why did you choose to get involved?
- How do you recruit members?
- Is there a target membership for your group? eg VPs, less experienced readers, those with mental health issues?
- How often does the group meet? When, where and for how long?
- How many people attend on average?
- What is your estimate of the average attendance of individual members: 1-off meeting, 2-6 meetings, more than 6 meetings?
- Who provides the books?
- Do you read mostly fiction or non-fiction?
- Do you read anything else eg plays or poetry?
- Is your group read-aloud?
- What if any are the major obstacles to the smooth running of your group?
- What do you view as the main benefits of reading for pleasure in prison?
- What do you view as the main benefits of the reading group for participants?
- What do you most enjoy about it?
- Do you think the group connects members to other people and/or the outside world? If so, how?
- What do you think members most value about the group?
- Do you think being in the group changes the reading habits of members? If so, how?
- Do you think they use the library more: yes, no, about the same?
- Do you think being in the group makes members more confident, inside and/or outside the group?
- Is it important that the group chooses what books to read? If so, why?
- Do you think there is a connection between reading group participation and increased feelings of agency and independence within the restricted environment of prison? Can you give examples?
- Is it important that members get new copies of the chosen books to keep? If so, why?
- Are you aware of increased member interest in other activities such as volunteering with the Shannon Trust or the Listeners, signing up for education or vocational courses, or other purposeful activity? Can you give examples?
- Do you think the group changes members' sense of themselves? If so, how?
- Free space for your comments

Appendix 2: WHAT GROUPS READ

There is wide variety in PRG membership and book choices. Reading experience may range from those who read two or three books a week to members who have never read a whole book when they join. There are groups whose reading lists concentrate on classic literature from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Dracula*. Others are more drawn to contemporary books, sometimes prize-winning titles or those that have been made into recent films. But almost all groups are ambitious and want to 'get out of the comfort zone'. The result is reading – both fiction and non-fiction – that challenges them and deepens their understanding of the wider world and different perspectives.

'This group is a wonderful thing because I would never have read such a book on the outside and it's changed my point of view completely.'

Sample lists: books chosen by three monthly PRG groups April – September, 2024

Men's prison | Category C

Claire Keegan, *Small Things Like These*
Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, *This is the Way You Lose the Time War*

Jessie Burton, *Medusa*
Emeric Pressburger, *Glass Pearls*
George Monbiot, *Regenesis*
Yoko Ogawa, *The Memory Police*

Women's prison

Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*
Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*
Bonnie Garmus, *Lessons in Chemistry*

Delia Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*
Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*
Janice Nix, *Breaking Out*

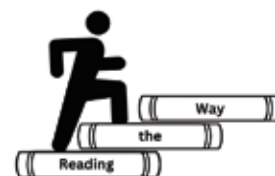
Men's prison | Category B, C

Mick Herron, *Slow Horses*
Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*
RL Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

Hisham Matar, *The Return*
Charles Portis, *True Grit*
Mark Watson, *Contacts*

Appendix 3: READING THE WAY

In 2023 PRG spearheaded a new partnership project with Education provider Novus and with support from libraries and the Shannon Trust. Its aim was to create and jointly run reading groups aimed specifically at prisoners who feel they struggle to read, often referred to as 'emergent readers'. The project, called *Reading the Way*, supplements formal phonics-based reading education with informal voluntary groups where the emphasis is on discussion, enjoyment and choice. Facilitators source varied material – short poems, stories, song lyrics, articles, social media threads, recipes – that responds to member interests. The project is too new to be included in this evaluation but the pilot was very successful. There are 20 *Reading the Way* groups currently running and a number of others about to start. Reports from both facilitators and participants have been very positive.



'It's not the same as doing it in class. I like having a chat with people in the group. It's different.'

'I felt comfortable in the group...it makes you feel more like you belong.'

'I feel more like someone who can read.'

For further information about the project see <https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/reading-the-way>

For the pilot report see
<https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Report-FINAL.pdf>

