Storytelling for Literacy and Community Healing

Storytelling for System-Impacted Individuals and Communities: A Literature Review

January 17, 2025

Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein, Bennett Attaway, & Elliott Bowen

Recommended Citation Barchas-Lichtenstein, J., Attaway, B., & Bowen, E. (2025). *Storytelling for System-Impacted Individuals and Communities: A Literature Review.* Knology Publication #NPO.074.1013.01. Knology.

Date of Publication January 17, 2025

Prepared for

Aubrey Huff
Assistant Director, Literacy & Continuing Education
ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services
225 N. Michigan Ave.
Suite 1300
Chicago, IL 60601

This material is based upon work supported by the Estee Lauder Foundation. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Estee Lauder Foundation.

Knology produces practical social science for a better world.

tel: (347) 766-3399
40 Exchange Pl. Suite 1403
New York, NY 10005

tel: (442) 222-8814
3630 Ocean Ranch Blvd.
Oceanside, CA 92056

Knology Publication # NPO.074.1013.01

Table of Contents

A Note on Terminology

Changing the narrative can include changing the language we commonly use, especially when our terms carry presuppositions about how things work and why they matter. We use two terms throughout this document that highlight our understanding of the carceral system.

As an alternative to the phrase "criminal justice system," many people now use the term ***"criminal legal system"*** in recognition of the fact that the U.S. carceral state rarely provides justice to those marginalized communities who are disproportionately policed and incarcerated. As Levin (2023) explains, the replacement of the word "justice" with "legal" is meant to *"disclaim(s) any suggestion that the system either is doing or is designed to do justice"* (p. 923). We use this term throughout this report.

Throughout this document, we use the term ***"system-impacted"*** to refer to people and communities that have been affected by the criminal legal system—whether legally, economically, or in connection with family relationships. This includes currently incarcerated individuals, formerly incarcerated individuals going through the process of reentry, those on probation or parole, and those who have been subject to arrest or convictions but not incarceration (Abeyta et al., 2021). Critically, system-impacted individuals also include people whose parents have been incarcerated (including those currently in foster care or residential treatment programs), and youth who are placed "at risk" for incarceration on account of "zero tolerance" policies that threaten to shuttle them from the educational to criminal legal systems (i.e., the school-to-prison pipeline) (Owens, 2017). In other words, a system-impacted individual is a person who has a relationship with the prison-industrial complex (PIC) (Burnett & Nguyen, 2022) and has been directly affected by its actions.

Introduction

"Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."
(Adichie, 2009, cited in Westrate et al., 2024, p. 351)

Nearly two million people in the U.S. are incarcerated in various types of facilities, and about one in four of them are awaiting trial — which means they have not yet been convicted of any crime (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). Yet dominant cultural narratives[1] around incarceration position the people who are incarcerated as deviant, dangerous, and damaged (Bove & Tryon, 2018, p. 4827). Rooted in ideas of inferiority and "otherness" (Tryon et al., 2023, p. 46), these narratives seek to dehumanize, oppress, and criminalize, making use of deficit-based frameworks that *"place(s) the responsibility of mass incarceration on individuals, their families, and their communities"* (Pech, 2022, p. 103, 23). Whether circulated explicitly in the media or reinforced insidiously by punitive policies, these narratives spread the harmful sociocultural message that some people are undeserving of protection and *"unworthy of participating in society"* (Bove & Tryon, 2018, p. 4827). In addition to stigmatizing those with a criminal record, these narratives *"make pathways to delinquency and subsequent incarceration typical and normal trajectories for children of incarcerated parents"* (Pech, 2022, p. 79-80).

The harmful effects of this well-established narrative have been widely documented. For those detained in carceral facilities, the "criminal" label can prompt rejection at the hands of friends, family, and society as a whole (Bove & Tryon, 2018). The isolation that results from this rejection is often accompanied by feelings of self-blame, guilt, and worthlessness—along with the adoption of maladaptive coping mechanisms such as hostility, aggression, and violence (Petrillo, 2021). For the formerly incarcerated, dominant carceral narratives can create fears of social interaction, as a belief that others will judge them on the basis of these narratives (instead of who they are as people) can *"restrict future opportunities," "limit the potential for normative social interaction,"* and *"amplify inner feelings of shame and low self-worth"* (Tryon et al., 2023, p. 46). More broadly, by internalizing negative assumptions about their own criminality, system-impacted individuals may come to see themselves as inherently immoral, and to believe that they are responsible *"not only for what they have done, but also for what has been done to them"* (Petrillo, 2021, p. 242). Finally, on a more general level, assumptions about the criminality of system-impacted people and ignorance of the psychological and social factors contributing to incarceration can be used to justify punitive policies (Maruna & King, 2009; Burton et al., 2020), such as the denial of access to educational and health-related services.

[1] As Chioneso et al. (2020) explain, a dominant cultural narrative *is "an overlearned (positive or negative) story communicated by major socializing institutions, often controlled by powerful people in a society, that impact the identities, beliefs, and values of the populace"* (p. 103).

Given the dehumanizing nature of prevailing social discourses around incarceration, researchers and activists have highlighted the need to *"push back on the accepted narratives around prison and prisoners"* (Higgins, 2017, p. 27). Storytelling offers an effective means of accomplishing this goal. For those with experiences of incarceration, the process of composing and sharing one's personal story (or to works of fiction informed by that story) has been shown to improve mental wellbeing, to promote a positive sense of self, to foster interpersonal relationships, and to help individuals *"overcome the barriers they face in recovering their true identities outside of prison"* (Kartikaningsih et al., 2023, p. 2). Storytelling can also help children work through the trauma and adversity that are often the result of parental incarceration (Monreal, 2021).

Those on the receiving end of these stories benefit as well. By listening to the personal narratives of system-impacted individuals, overcriminalized groups can counteract self-rejecting thought patterns, gain understanding of how others have overcome similar challenges, and resist the tendency to internalize blame (Chioneso et al., 2020). At the community level, the sharing of personal narratives can serve as a tool for resisting oppression—one that contributes to the restoration of cultural identities and helps groups resist the *"interpersonal distrust that is tied to denigrating dominant cultural narratives"* (Chioneso et al., 2020, p. 107). When circulated in public settings in writing or speaking, these stories can help raise awareness of the *"undisputed harms associated with imprisonment"* (Petrillo, 2021, p. 246), encourage audiences to *"reconsider stereotypes about incarcerated people"* (Bove & Tryon, 2018, p. 4827), and fuel hopes for positive social change.

This literature review offers research-backed guidance about the kinds of storytelling programs libraries can create when looking to raise awareness of carceral systems, improve the wellbeing of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals (along with their family members and loved ones), and generate opportunities for community advocacy around social justice concerns. This review opens with an introduction to current library work taking place in the context of the criminal legal system. It then introduces the concept of counterstorytelling before looking at the value of a range of storytelling programs and initiatives that have been implemented with system-impacted communities. We then bring these threads together with recommendations and a call to action, including general considerations that should factor into libraries' efforts in support of the production and circulation of counternarratives—that is, stories that allow marginalized groups to resist oppression by disrupting social preconceptions (Griffin & Kiderra, 2024).

Libraries & the Criminal Legal System

One key role that libraries can play in the criminal legal system is to address *"piecemeal and limited access to information"* (Austin, 2022, p.97). In direct contrast to the values espoused by the library field, the carceral system engages in extensive censorship, and deliberately poor record-keeping makes it difficult to understand the full extent of censorship in practice (see Marquis & Luna, 2003, for an in-depth look at the ubiquity of censorship in prisons).

Recent reviews of the field (Austin, 2022; Jordan-Makely & Austin, 2021; Jordan-Makely et al., 2022) have found that libraries currently provide a wide variety of supports to system-impacted populations.

Most of the literature on library work in this context focuses on service delivery to currently and recently incarcerated people, including book delivery services, reference-by-mail services, literacy and education programs, legal assistance, technology training, employment workshops and career fairs, the sharing of reentry resources, and family-centered programming. But as Austin (2022) notes,

> *Given the reach of carceral systems, not only through state supervision and technology-based monitoring, but also through the social support networks and relationships that maintain in spite of or are fractured by carceral practices, the publics, students, and other patrons who already rely on libraries as providers of reliable information and recreational materials are impacted by incarceration. This is true even when libraries or other information institutions do not offer direct or indirect services to people who are currently inside of immigrant detention centers, jails, juvenile detention centers, or prisons (p.153).*

Whether provided through face-to-face interactions, through indirect means, or as a form of reentry support, these services can help reduce disparities in communities and positively contribute to the wellbeing of system-impacted people. At the same time, as Tonya Garcia of the Long Branch Free Public Library observes, *"There is much more libraries can do to support people whose lives have been upended by mass incarceration and its lingering stigma"* (Jordan-Makely & Austin, 2021). Among other possibilities, libraries have an opportunity to contribute to the broader project of reshaping common narratives about incarceration (Higgins, 2017).

Storytelling & Counterstorytelling

Stories are foundational to the way people understand themselves, others, and their place in the world (Westrate et al., 2024). They provide a means of linking together varied experiences and of making meaning out of these experiences (Kiser et al., 2010). The most widely shared stories transmit the beliefs and values of socially dominant groups; often, they serve the interests of those in power. These culturally authoritative *"master narratives"* often work to *"marginalize those who do not or cannot conform to them"* (Weststrate et al., 2024, p. 354). People who do not see themselves reflected in dominant cultural narratives often experience feelings of isolation, a lack of belonging, and invalidation (Weststrate et al., 2024).

Importantly, however, those who are silenced and oppressed by dominant stories can resist these *"by developing alternative narratives that better reflect their realities"* (Westrate et al, 2024, p. 354). Counterstorytelling—the practice of telling stories from perspectives that hold less power—is critical for addressing the needs of system-impacted individuals and communities. Counterstorytelling seeks to *"elevate the voices of populations who are often forgotten and long silenced"* (Monrael, 2021, p. 104), and, more specifically, to refute negative stories about oppressed or marginalized groups (Bell, 2003; Haaken et al., 2012). As a tool of resistance, counterstories record both the harms experienced by minoritized groups and the ways these groups are reacting to unjust practices, discourses, and institutions (Yosso, 2006). They treat the perspectives and lived experiences of non-dominant groups as *"cultural assets or resources"* (Bernal, 2002, p.113) that can be used to help individuals navigate hostile environments (Bates, 2019), to promote healing from historical trauma impacting entire communities (Chioneso et al., 2020), and to dismantle or transform systems marked by racism, sexism, and classism (Maxwell & Sonn, 2020; Pech, 2022). Counterstories can also serve as a means of countering what scholars call *"hermeneutical injustice"*—that is, situations where individuals are *"disadvantaged as learners or would-be-knowers because they are unable to access meaning-making frameworks that are necessary to understanding their identities and navigating their marginality"* (Weststrate et al., 2024, p. 355).

As Monreal (2021) explains, counterstorytelling occurs whenever a person shares their life story or a particular aspect of it *"either informally in a conversation with another person or formally as a culturally responsive tool in a therapeutic setting"* (p. 104). In particular, counterstories have been promoted as a tool for resisting the criminal legal system's oppressive features (Comas-Díaz, 2016; Denham, 2008). By revealing what is hidden, missing, or deprioritized (McDowell & Cooke, 2022), these counternarratives disrupt prevailing cultural assumptions around the connections between race, gender, familial cycles, and crime (Jacobi, 2016). In so doing, counterstorytelling can promote both personal and community healing (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2007; Grills et al., 2016). On a broader level, counterstorytelling has the potential to prompt widespread rethinking of the criminal legal system—including *"what currently confined people might contribute to a robust citizenry"* (Jacobi, 2016, p. 71).

This way of thinking is already a strength of libraries and library workers. In a recent piece, McDowell and Cooke (2022) present a compelling vision of librarianship as *"social justice storytelling."* As they write (p. 373), *"These [social justice] stories help make the case for broadening services despite pervasive social inequities that make injustices invisible."* While their piece focuses primarily on barriers to accessing library services, the same argument holds true for the carceral context. That is, stories from within prisons can help make system-impacted populations more visible stakeholders in the criminal legal system.

The Value and Impact of Storytelling: Examples from the Literature

In large part, the impacts that result from storytelling programs are determined by who exactly are positioned as tellers and listeners. In keeping with calls to avoid descriptions that lump different system-impacted individuals together (e.g., Monreal, 2021), the following discussion examines these questions of authorship, format, and audience in close detail, spotlighting the diverse approaches to storytelling libraries might take in their programming efforts.

Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Adults as Storytellers

Some storytelling programs are designed to give currently or formerly incarcerated adults a platform for sharing their lived experiences. Whether shared with peers in carceral facilities, with non-incarcerated individuals in schools and other public settings, or as written accounts published in journals and magazines, these narratives help individuals heal from trauma, adopt a more positive sense of self, reclaim a sense of personal agency, forge new relationships with others inside and outside of carceral settings, and educate the broader public about the realities of the carceral system.

Some storytelling takes place within the walls of carceral settings. An example can be seen in research conducted by Petrillo (2021), who examined a trauma-informed intervention undertaken within an English women's custodial facility. For six weeks, women in this facility participated in a series of gender-responsive sessions that covered such subjects as *"power and abuse,"* self-care, *"adverse childhood experiences and anger,"* and healthy relationships (p. 233). Administered by trained and supervised current prison residents, the program included a mix of cognitive behavioral therapy, relational therapy, guided imagery, mindfulness, and the expressive arts. While prisons are "*fundamentally harmful environments*," Petrillo found that trauma-informed interventions can "*create space for healing*" within the carceral environment (p. 233).

A particularly effective part of the intervention focused on sharing stories. When discussing the program's benefits, participants said that the intervention helped them realize that they were not alone in their experiences. Beyond this feeling of solidarity, the program also helped them overcome shame and reconnect with suppressed emotions. As Petrillo writes: "*Sharing stories can also be a mechanism for overcoming shame and isolation by creating space for collective knowledge that can counter harmful sociocultural discourses*" (p. 238).

Similar effects have been observed in storytelling programs for formerly incarcerated individuals. In one study, Kartikaningsih et al. (2023) examined a six-week expressive writing and storytelling program offered to formerly incarcerated individuals by the Offender Alumni Association (OAA), a non-profit organization based in Birmingham, Alabama. Each week, participants wrote a story on a different topic—including their earliest memories, their most influential relationships, their lives' most significant triumphs or disappointments, experiences of loss, and their *"feelings about a family member coming home again or never being able to come home again"* (p. 4)—and shared it with other members of the group. In evaluating the program's impacts, the study's authors found that participants appreciated being able to explore their inner feelings, that they were able to connect with their peers on a new level, and that they learned how to readjust negative self-concepts in ways that helped them *"understand that it is possible to continue to handle challenges that happen in their life"* (p. 11). After reflecting on their past experiences, some said they were motivated to *"desist from crime and avoid recidivism"* (p. 11). Commenting on these impacts, the study found that the program helped participants *"see things from a new perspective"*—an *"important milestone [...] in moving forward in their recovery and community reentry journey"* (p. 12).

Some storytelling programs for people who are currently incarcerated include a community outreach component. A pair of studies focus on interviews with incarcerated people who shared their lived experiences with high school students through a project called Stories of Change (Bove & Tryon, 2018; Tryon et al., 2023). Participants were anxious about discussing their stories, and described the experience of sharing with others as *"difficult," "scary,"* and *"very challenging"* (Bove & Tryon, 2018, p. 4823). Ultimately, however, both men and women said they benefited from participating in the program. The act of storytelling, they found, helped them overcome feelings of anger, guilt, and helplessness, leading to participants *"understanding themselves and their past experiences in new ways"* (Tryon et al., 2023, p. 43) and the emergence of *"a more positive sense of self"* (Bove & Tryon, 2018, p. 4827). Stories of Change also provided a space for participants to explore an *"alternative identity"*—one "*not defined by stigma, past choices, and stereotypes"* (p. 4827). In addition to gaining new power over their lives, storytellers also "*began to rebuild relationships"* (p. 4827). Many found that they were able to make *"powerful"* connections with students and teachers. In particular, the experience reminded participants of something they had forgotten while in prison: that *"it was possible to relate with people who are not incarcerated,"* and that sharing their stories was a way to make such connections attainable (Tryon et al., 2023, p. 42).

Students also benefited from the program. Some said that participants had *"changed their perceptions about people who use substances or are incarcerated"* (Tryon et al., 2023, p. 44). After hearing their stories, some students approached participants to discuss their own struggles. A few became pen pals with participants. According to the study's authors, Stories of Change *"began a process of destigmatization"*—one that helped both listeners and tellers understand the individuals who exist underneath the *"prisoner"* label (Bove & Tryon, 2018, p. 4815).

Nor do the stories have to be personal life stories. Jacobi (2016) describes a writing workshop program conducted in several Colorado-based correctional facilities. Called SpeakOut!, the program is run by volunteer facilitators from Colorado State University and the local community. Since 2005, it has given incarcerated youth and adults an opportunity

to experiment with writing in different ways—as therapy, as art, as a skill set, and as a communication tool. Consisting of a sixteen-week-long series of workshops that give participants opportunities to *"explore how writing might represent their lives, interests, and theories about the world"* (p. 65), the program also includes a community outreach component and seeks to help writers disseminate their work beyond carceral walls. Twice every year, the *SpeakOut! Journal* publishes samples of participants' work, which help *"counter dominant narratives of race and cultural tendencies toward crime"* (p. 65). Incarcerated writers also participate in writing exchanges with university students. These mutually beneficial exchanges help writers *"reach new audiences with counternarratives of carceral identity"* and also shatter many students' *"dark assumptions about incarcerated people"* (p. 70).

System-Impacted Youth as Storytellers

As the following examples illustrate, youth have narrativized their experiences with the criminal legal system as theatrical productions, in the context of structured interviews with researchers, and as a form of political advocacy. Regardless of the shape their narratives have taken, storytelling can help youth heal from trauma, build empathy with themselves and others, and create new identities. In addition to the personal empowerment they provide, youth-authored stories can help deepen public understanding of the criminal legal system and instigate processes of social and political change.

In a study of plays written and performed by incarcerated girls, Winn (2010) looks at how a theater-based storytelling program helped youth of color challenge the "at-risk" label that dominant social narratives have attached to them. Called Girl Time, the program was created by a group of artists working for a woman-focused theater company. Through a two-day workshop, the artists taught incarcerated girls being held in regional youth detention centers how to write and stage a play. At the end of the workshop, these girls performed their plays for an audience consisting of their families, other incarcerated youth, junior correctional officers, and detention center administrators. In a separate summer program, plays written by formerly incarcerated girls were performed in a public theater.

While fictional, these plays are "*based in reality,*" and according to Winn, they serve as *"tools of inquiry for interrogating the prison industrial complex and school-to-prison nexus"* (Winn, 2010, p. 316). For participants, the process of writing and performing their work helped to build empathy, helping incarcerated girls understand that *"they were not alone in their stories and experiences"* (p. 320). The plays also provided storytellers an opportunity to *"speak back to their peers"* (p. 316), and to *"reintroduce themselves to an audience who understood them only as (and limited them to) labels such as 'at risk,' 'troubled,' or 'delinquent'"* (Winn, 2015, p. 65). Though these labels attempt to lock systems-impacted youth *"into a single story,"* Girl Time compelled audiences to consider questions *"about who these girls were and why they had been herded from schools to jails"* (Winn, 2010, p. 319). As a storytelling program, Girl Time helped incarcerated youth demonstrate to others that their lives *"are not static,"* and do not have to be *"predetermined by poverty and miseducation"* (Winn, 2015, p. 59).

In another study, Monreal (2017) looked at the extent to which *"a narrative form of counterstorytelling"* called *testimonios* (p. 101) could help female children of color address the traumatic effects of parental incarceration. Through retrospective interviews with two women whose parents were incarcerated when they were children and a legal services employee at a nonprofit organization who had worked directly with these women, Monreal learned that the process of sharing *testimonios* provided a *"strong sense of healing"* and was *"a form of empowerment"* (p. 107). The employee noted that personal storytelling can be an important outlet for family members of incarcerated people. Because of prevailing stigmas, children are often told that incarcerated parents are on vacation; when they learn the truth, they often conceal their knowledge from others. Instead of *"perpetuating avoidance and secrecy"* (p. 108), Monreal argues, *testimonios* can enable women in similar situations to fully disclose their experiences. Being able to *"open up"* (p. 109) proved therapeutic for these two women. The nonprofit organization that worked with these women also benefited from being part of the storytelling process. Given the fact that those who provide services for children of incarcerated parents commonly *"shield the child from the truth of what is really happening with their parents"* (p. 108), this storytelling experience was helpful in that it provided these providers with a more nuanced understanding of *"the specific needs of the people they serve"* (p. 110).

In another study of youth-led storytelling efforts, researchers looked at the role that counterstories played in a campaign low-income youth of color in Chicago launched against the school-to-prison pipeline (Moyer et al., 2020). Led by a coalition called Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), the campaign spearheaded the passage of an Illinois law that banned zero-tolerance discipline policies. A key part of this advocacy campaign involved students sharing their personal stories about the *"harsh, and sometimes traumatizing, unfair disciplinary incidents that they had suffered in [Chicago Public Schools]"* (p. 183). At the start of the campaign, VOYCE trained young people in storytelling techniques. Then student activists traveled to Springfield to tell these stories to members of the Illinois legislature during hearings and in one-on-one meetings.

The ***"school-to-prison pipeline"*** refers to *"a social phenomenon where students become formally involved with the criminal justice system as a result of school policies that use law enforcement, rather than discipline, to address behavioral problems"* (Owens, 2017).

This storytelling campaign had multiple impacts. Prior to joining VOYCE, students *"sometimes blamed themselves for their failures"* (p. 181). But the process of telling their stories was empowering, as it enabled students *"to see that their experiences were shared by others and therefore part of a larger systemic problem"* (p. 185). As students came to understand the systemic causes of their experiences, they were transformed into *"change agents in their own lives and within their communities"* (p. 181). In addition to helping youth develop a *"collective consciousness and broader vision of the social systems that impacted their education,"* the storytelling efforts that were at the heart of this campaign *"shifted legislators' attitudes about 'bad' students"* (p. 185-186). Legislators *"came to empathize with the students who had been victimized by these harmful policies"*—a development that made it difficult for them to justify punitive zero-tolerance policies (p. 184).

Storytelling Programming Implementation for Libraries

While the storytelling interventions described in the prior section were not implemented by libraries, each of them plays to strengths that libraries would bring to this work.

Do What Libraries Do Best: Build Partnerships with Groups Already Working with System-impacted Communities

Libraries are no strangers to partnership work (Flinner et al., 2019). Libraries of all sizes rely on partnerships (Attaway et al., 2023) to improve all stages of programming, from design to impact (Knology, 2023).

Given the complexities of the criminal legal system, this area is particularly ripe for partnerships: establishing ties with organizations that have a history of working with system-impacted communities and prison administrators can greatly support libraries' programming efforts. As Rachel Forbes, a librarian specialist at the Contra Costa County Library, puts it:

> *Partnerships are vitally important. I would start with reaching out to the schools located inside the facilities. I found that the school department in my facility has a lot of knowledge when it comes to what the kids need and want, so I like to ask where they need assistance. It is not always easy because there are many security clearances, rules, and policies that need to be followed, but I constantly remind myself to be patient. Outside organizations and groups are incredibly generous and often are willing to help the library when it comes to reaching incarcerated youth. (Jordan-Makely & Austin, 2021)*

As Forbes' statement makes clear, beyond offering an additional avenue for learning, building partnerships offers libraries a pathway to program development.

Partnerships are also valuable as a means of equipping storytellers with the knowledge and tools needed to build critical literacies. As Winn (2010) notes, on account of educational inequities, many system-impacted individuals lack access to the kinds of curricula needed to engage in discussion of the US carceral system. Without this access, many may internalize dominant narratives of incarceration, believing that their situations are *"solely the outcome of their poor choices"* (Winn, 2010, p. 318). Similarly, in their study of the VOYCE campaign, Moyer et al. noted the presence of adult organizers who provide *"historical and critical perspectives on racial and educational injustice to help youth leaders think critically and analyze their data and personal experiences"* (pp. 181-182). These examples highlight some of the benefits community partners can bring to libraries' programming efforts.

Partnerships are perhaps most useful as a means of reminding libraries that storytelling programs in and of themselves will not solve the problems of the U.S. carceral system. As Winn noted, while these programs can serve as a source of healing, inspiration, creativity, and even freedom, they can only go so far to provide for the needs of system-impacted individuals. Ultimately, these individuals need *"allies and advocates who can help them transition back into school, jobs, facilitate healthcare and childcare as well as safe, affordable housing"* (Winn, 2010, p. 322). Storytelling partnerships are valuable for libraries because they can offer a means of connecting system-impacted patrons to these allies and advocates.

The American Library Association (2024) offers a useful toolkit for building partnerships and starting new initiatives within existing ones.

Deepen Community Knowledge of the Criminal Legal System

Nearly half of Americans have an immediate family member who has been incarcerated (Enns et al., 2019), which means that every library works with system-impacted populations.

People who are not system-impacted need to learn about the realities of the U.S. carceral system, and about the many different impacts it has on incarcerated individuals, their families, and their broader communities. Jordan-Makely and Austin (2021) suggest library workers begin learning by reading about incarceration and the experiences of incarcerated people. Reading together with communities in a book group at the library can also be a powerful program opportunity: a number of organizations have created reading lists on mass incarceration—see those provided by Book Riot (Corrigan, 2020) and the Marshall Project (Marshall Project, n.d.)—which can help communities understand and reflect on how the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and the carceral state work, and *"how everyone is impacted"* (Jordan-Makely & Austin, 2021).

Other opportunities to both deepen community knowledge and support system-impacted people include volunteering or partnering with groups that *"offer information access or coordinate pen pals"* (Jordan-Makely & Austin, 2021).

Empower System-Impacted People to Lead

System-impacted individuals are *"knowledgeable about their own information needs and practices"* (Austin, 2022, p. 111). In practical terms, this means grounding program development in the recognition that, by virtue of their experiences and knowledge, system-impacted people are best positioned to lead efforts to transform oppressive systems and practices. It can mean adhering to a participatory model in which system-impacted individuals and communities contribute to the shaping of services and programs with the power to control where and how their stories are shared.

For example, the SpeakOut! program (Jacobi, 2016) established a participatory curation approach, empowering incarcerated participants to *"co-sponsor when, where, and how the experience unfolds and enters the public sphere"* (Jacobi, 2016, p. 65).

This participatory model can serve as an inspiration for programs that allow libraries to go beyond their traditional role as service providers. Austin (2022) suggests several possibilities for these kinds of programs:

> *Offering paid speaking engagements to formerly incarcerated people can help to raise public awareness about the realities of incarceration and reentry, and may build public support for ongoing programming and services through the library. Formerly incarcerated people can also act as ambassadors to others in reentry by introducing them to networks, nonprofits, and other local resources that offer support to people who are navigating reentry. Some topics might include relationships with families and working with public defenders and other legal representatives. This type of programming can be expanded to focus on the family and social support networks of individuals in the process of reentry, connecting the members of these networks to library resources and materials that might help to reduce the stress they experience as they assist their loved ones and friends during the reentry process (p. 147).*

Build in Self-Care

Stories about the criminal legal system can be heavy. Libraries must also encourage self-care practices among storytellers, listeners, and those who work with them as they craft their narratives. Speaking in the context of writing workshops, Jacobi (2016) argues that program leaders *"have a responsibility to offer both writers and workshop facilitators concrete self-care tools, e.g. structured writes, anonymity, space for talk, as they accumulate experiences with difficult narratives"* (p. 68).

Conclusion

In *Library Services and Incarceration*, Austin (2022) notes that the immense spread of the U.S. carceral state has created *"many points of entry"* for library programs and services aimed at improving the wellbeing of system-impacted individuals and communities (p. xvii). After describing current library work happening with the criminal legal system, this literature review highlighted one particular point of entry: storytelling.

Storytelling can be an empowering practice, both at the individual and collective levels. For individuals, storytelling promotes a positive sense of self, helping them overcome negative feelings (including anger, guilt, and helplessness) as part of their personal journeys toward self-acceptance (e.g. Bove & Tryon, 2008). For communities, storytelling can build interpersonal trust, contribute to the restoration of cultural identities, and spark critical reflection, collective organizing, and advocacy (Chioneso et al., 2020).

By creating opportunities for system-impacted individuals to share their lived experiences on their terms, libraries can contribute to the production and dissemination of ***counternarratives***—that is, stories that allow marginalized groups to resist oppression by disrupting social preconceptions (Griffin & Kiderra, 2024). In addition to helping system-impacted individuals gain access to the kinds of meaning-making frameworks needed to understand themselves and navigate their worlds (Weststrate et al., 2024), the practice of counterstorytelling can help stimulate more general rethinking of the criminal legal system.

We encourage libraries seeking to engage in these kinds of storytelling programs to:

- build partnerships to support the work;
- deepen community knowledge of the criminal legal system through stories;
- empower system-impacted people to lead; *and*
- build in opportunities for self-care.

References

Abeyta, M., Torres, A., Hernandez, J. L., & Duran, O. (2021). Rising scholars: A case study of two community colleges serving formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College, 28*(1), 99-109.

Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). The danger of a single story [Video]. *TED Conferences.* https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?subtitle=en

American Library Association. (2024). *Partnering for Stronger Programming: A Toolkit for Libraries.* https://nilppa.org/resources/toolkit/

Attaway, B., Norlander, R.J., & Bowen. E. (2023, Feb. 13). *A survey of libraries: Tell us about your community partnerships!* Knology. https://knology.org/article/a-survey-of-libraries-tell-us-about-your-community-partnerships/

Austin, J. (2021). *Library services and incarceration: Recognizing barriers, strengthening access.* ALA Neal-Schuman.

Bates, R. (2019). Using counter-stories as strategies to navigate hostile campus environments. In M.G. Burke & U.M. Robinson (Eds.), *No ways tired: The journey for professionals of color in student affairs, volume II* (pp. 15-23). Information Age Publishing.

Bell, L. A. (2010). *Storytelling for social justice: Connecting narrative and the arts in antiracist teaching*. Routledge.

Bernal, D. D. (2006). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: The Mestiza consciousness of Chicana students. In D.D. Bernal, C.A. Elenes, F.E. Godinez, & S. Villenas (Eds.), *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 113-130). State University of New York Press.

Bove, A. & Tryon, R. (2018). The power of storytelling: The experiences of incarcerated women sharing their stories. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 62*(15), 4814-4833. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18785100

Bryant-Davis, T., & Ocampo, C. (2006). A therapeutic approach to the treatment of racist-incident-based trauma. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, *6*(4), 1-22.

Burton, A. L., Cullen, F. T., Burton Jr, V. S., Graham, A., Butler, L. C., & Thielo, A. J. (2020). Belief in redeemability and punitive public opinion: "Once a criminal, always a criminal" revisited. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *47*(6), 712-732. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820913585

Carter, R. T. (2007). Racism and psychological and emotional injury: Recognizing and assessing race-based traumatic stress. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *35*(1), 13-105.

Chioneso, N. A., Hunter, C. D., Gobin, R. L., McNeil Smith, S., Mendenhall, R., & Neville, H. A. (2020). Community healing and resistance through storytelling: A framework to address racial trauma in Africana communities. *Journal of Black Psychology, 46*(2-3), 95-121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798420929468

Comas-Díaz, L. (2016). Racial trauma recovery: A race-informed therapeutic approach to racial wounds. In A. N. Alvarez, C. T. H. Liang, & H. A. Neville (Eds.), *The cost of racism to people of color: Contextualizing experiences of dis- crimination* (pp. 341-375). American Psychological Association.

Corrigan, H. (2020, September 29). *8 books that highlight how broken the U.S. criminal justice system is.* Book Riot. https://bookriot.com/books-about-the-broken-us-criminal-justice-system/

Denham, A. R. (2008). Rethinking historical trauma: Narratives of resilience. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *45*(3), 391-414. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461508 094673

Enns, P. K., Yi, Y., Comfort, M., Goldman, A. W., Lee, H., Muller, C., Wakefield, S., Wang, E. A., & Wildeman, C. (2019). What percentage of Americans have ever had a family member incarcerated?: Evidence from the Family History of Incarceration Survey (FamHIS). *Socius*, 5. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119829332

Flinner, K., Norlander, R.J., Nock, K., Laursen Brucker, J. & Welch, M. (2019) *Library Programs & New Americans: A White Paper*. NewKnowledge Publication #NPO.074.518.03. American Library Association & New Knowledge Organization Ltd.

Griffin, J., & Kiderra, I. (2024, April 4). Disrupting narratives that legitimize long-term incarceration, from the inside out. *UC San Diego Today*. https://today-new.ucsd.edu/story/disrupting-narratives-that-legitimize-long-term-incarceration

Grills, C., Aird, E., & Rowe, D. (2016). Breathe, baby, breathe: Clearing the way for the emotional emancipation of Black people. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, *16*(3), 333-343.

Haaken, J., Wallin-Ruschman, J., & Patange, S. (2012). Global hip-hop identities: Black youth, psychoanalytic action research, and the *Moving to the Beat* project. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *22*(1), 63-74. https://doi. org/10.1002/casp.1097

Higgins, N. (2017). *Get inside: Responsible jail and prison library service.* Public Library Association.

Jackson, S. (2021). Restorative libraries: Restorative justice practices and how to implement them. *Library Journal*. https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Restorative-Libraries-Restorative-Justice-Practices-and-How-to-Implement-Them

Jacobi, T. (2016). Against infrastructure: curating community literacy in a jail writing program. *Community Literacy Journal, 11*(1), 64–75. https://doi.org/10.25148/clj.11.1.009250

Jordan-Makely, C., & Austin, J. (2021, September 8). Outside and in: Services for people impacted by incarceration. *Library Journal*. https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Outside-and-In-Services-for-People-Impacted-By-Incarceration

Jordan-Makely, C., Austin, J., & Brammer, C. (2022). Growing services: How libraries outside of prisons create access to information for incarcerated people. *Library Journal, 147*(8), 24–30. https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Growing-Services-Libraries-Creating-Access-for-Incarcerated-People

Kartikaningsih, N., Lawson, K., Mayhan, M., Spears, E., Chew, O., Green, S., Tucker, S.C., Kirklin, K., & Yuen, H. K. (2023). The impact of an expressive writing and storytelling program on ex-offenders: A pilot study. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 0306624X231188228. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X231188228

Knology. (2023, April 25). *Better programs, deeper impacts, and expanded capacities: What makes library partnerships valuable.* Knology. https://knology.org/article/better-programs-deeper-impacts-and-expanded-capacities-what-makes-library-partner/

Levin, B. (2023). After the criminal justice system. *Washington Law Review, 98*, 899-946.

Marquis, M., & Luna, J. (2023, Oct. 25). *Reading between the bars: An in-depth look at prison censorship.* PEN America. https://pen.org/report/reading-between-the-bars/

Marshall Project. (n.d.). *Mass Incarceration – The Bookshelf.* https://www.themarshallproject.org/books?tag=617#

Maruna, S., & King, A. (2009). Once a criminal, always a criminal?: "Redeemability" and the psychology of punitive public attitudes. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research, 15*(1–2), 7–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-008-9088-1

Maxwell, C., & Sonn, C. (2021). The performative is political: Using counter-storytelling through theater to create spaces for implicated witnessing. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *68*(1-2), 47-60. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12493

McDowell, K., & Cooke, N. A. (2022). Social justice storytelling: A pedagogical imperative. *Library Quarterly, 92*(4), 355–378. https://doi.org/10.1086/721391

Monrael, A. B. (2021). The testimonios of system-impacted daughters of color on healing from parental incarceration. *Columbia Social Work Review, 19*(1), 100-115. *https://doi.org/10.52214/cswr.v19i1.7540*

Moyer, J. S., Warren, M. R., & King, A. R. (2020). "Our stories are powerful": The use of youth storytelling in policy advocacy to combat the school-to-prison pipeline. *Harvard Educational Review, 90*(2), 172-194, 340-341, 343. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-90.2.172

Owens, E. G. (2017). Testing the school-to-prison pipeline. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 36(1), 11-37. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21954

Pech, A. S. (2022). *Using counterstorytelling to understand identity development and center adolescent girls and young women of color impacted by familial incarceration.* [Dissertation]. University of Arizona, Department of Family & Consumer Sciences.

Petrillo, M. (2021). 'We've all got a big story': Experiences of a trauma-informed intervention in prison. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 60*(2), 232–250. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12408

Sawyer, W. & Wagner. P. (2024). *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024*. Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html

Tryon, R., Gerstenblatt, P., & Bove, A. (2023). "It's just flourishing hope everywhere": The experiences of incarcerated men sharing their stories. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 67*(1), 34–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X221102834

Weststrate, N.M., McLean, K.C., & Fivush, R. (2024). Intergenerational storytelling and positive psychosocial development: Stories as developmental resources for marginalized groups. *Personality & Social Psychology Review, 28*, 4. https://doi.org/10.1177/10888683241259900

Winn, M. T. (2010). 'Our side of the story': Moving incarcerated youth voices from margins to center. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 13*(3), 313-25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2010.500838

Winn, M. T. (2015). Exploring the literate trajectories of youth across time and space. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 22*(1), 58–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2014.990037

Yosso, T. J. (2006). Why use critical race theory and counterstorytelling to analyze the Chicana/o educational pipeline? In T.J. Yosso (Ed.), *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline* (pp. 1-20). Taylor & Francis Group.

Knology®

Behaviors

Biosphere

Culture

Media

Systems

Wellbeing

Knology.org
fax: 347-288-0999

tel: (442) 222-8814
3630 Ocean Ranch Blvd.
Oceanside, CA 92056

tel: (347) 766-3399
40 Exchange Pl. Suite 1403
New York, NY 10005