

# Exploring the Potential of Prison Libraries: Stakeholder Insights from South Korea and the United States \*

교정시설도서관의 가능성 모색: 한국과 미국의 이해관계자를 중심으로

Haeun Cho (조하은)\*\*      Yerin Kim (김예린)\*\*\*  
Jiwon Yeom (염지원)\*\*\*\*      Sieun Lee (이시은)\*\*\*\*\*  
Kung Jin Lee (이경진)\*\*\*\*\*

## ABSTRACT

Prison libraries play a significant role in ensuring incarcerated individuals' right to access information and to support their reentry. However, prison libraries in South Korea are valued more for their existence than for their function and remain largely inactive. Comparatively, the United States prisons had relatively greater openness and accessibility. Therefore, we have interviewed 18 stakeholders of library staff and collaborators from both South Korea and the United States to explore possible plans for improving prison libraries in South Korea. Based on the examination of the interviews, the study identified three key discussion points: stakeholder perceptions, prison library system, and collaboration for prison libraries. Collaborative systems are the key that can solve the lack of qualified staff and institutional support. This research is expected to lay the foundation for further studies on prison libraries and serve as critical reference material for future policy development.

## 초 록

교정시설도서관은 수감자들의 정보 접근권을 보장하고 사회 재진입에 필요한 지식을 제공하는 것에 중요한 역할을 한다. 그러나 한국의 교정시설도서관은 그 역할과 기능보다는 존재 자체에 의의를 두며, 실질적으로 활성화되지 않은 상태로 남아 있다. 본 연구는 비교적 개방적이고 접근성이 높은 미국의 사례를 포함하여 한국과 미국에서 교정시설도서관과 관련된 이해관계자의 경험과 인식을 탐색하는 연구를 진행하였다. 한국과 미국의 담당자와 협력자로 구분된 18명의 이해관계자를 인터뷰하여, 한국 교정시설도서관의 개선 방향을 모색하였다. 인터뷰 분석 결과, 이해관계자의 인식, 교정시설도서관 시스템, 협력이라는 세 가지 주요 논의점을 도출하였다. 특히, 협력 체계는 전문 사서 부족과 제도적 지원 미비와 같은 문제를 해결할 수 있는 핵심 요소로 확인되었다. 본 연구는 교정시설도서관에 대한 후속 연구의 기반을 제공하며, 향후 정책 개발에 중요한 참고 자료로 활용될 수 있을 것으로 기대된다.

Keywords: Prison library, Incarcerated individuals, Correctional facility, Collaborative systems, Reentry  
교정시설도서관, 수용자, 교정시설, 협력 체계, 재사회화

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\*\* 이화여자대학교 사회과학대학 문헌정보학과 학부생 (haeun4178@ewha.ac.kr) (제1저자)

\*\*\* 이화여자대학교 사회과학대학 문헌정보학과 학부생 (ky1804@ewha.ac.kr) (공동저자)

\*\*\*\* 이화여자대학교 사회과학대학 문헌정보학과 학부생 (moeyw03@ewha.ac.kr) (공동저자)

\*\*\*\*\* 이화여자대학교 사회과학대학 문헌정보학과 학부생 (lse2283015@ewha.ac.kr) (공동저자)

\*\*\*\*\* 이화여자대학교 사회과학대학 문헌정보학과 조교수 (kungjinlee@ewha.ac.kr) (교신저자)

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## 1. Introduction

Article 46 of the Act on Execution of Sentences and Treatment of Inmates requires correctional facilities to make books available for incarcerated individuals, ensuring their access and use (2022, Act No.19105). This provision aims to safeguard the right to know of incarcerated individuals, recognized as a fundamental human right. Facilitating the establishment and operation of libraries within correctional facilities serves as an effective means to uphold this right (Hong, 2004). As of 2023, 96% of (n=36,682) incarcerated individuals in South Korea were serving sentences with eventual reentry, and 48,576 individuals completed their sentences and returned to the community in the same year (Ministry of Justice, 2024). This indicates that the majority of incarcerated individuals ultimately reintegrate into society, highlighting the role of prison libraries as a bridge that facilitates their transition (Kwon & Yoon, 2009).

South Korea's correctional facilities comprise a total of 55 facilities, including 40 prisons, 12 detention centers, and 3 branch facilities (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Libraries have been established in 54 out of 55 facilities (National Library Statistics System, 2023). This study aims to address improvement strategies for all libraries within correctional facilities, regardless of the type of facility. To maintain consistency, the term 'correctional facility' is used throughout the study without specifying a particular type of facility. However, as the term 'prison library' is widely used in academia to refer to libraries within correctional facilities, this study adopts the term

'prison library' to describe all libraries in correctional facilities. In this context, the term prison library does not solely refer to libraries in prisons but encompasses all libraries located within correctional facilities.

Various challenges currently hinder these libraries from fully performing their intended roles. Jeong and Song (2013) highlighted issues in South Korea such as inadequate funding and the absence of professional librarians, which in turn contribute to restricted accessibility, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of prison libraries. As of 2022, the average size of a prison library in South Korea was 53.9m<sup>2</sup>, and the budget allocated for book purchases averaged only 2.102 million Korean won (KWR). Notably, 21 facilities allocated less than 1 million KRW, while 12 facilities did not utilize any budget. Additionally, none of the 54 facilities employed professional librarians (Study on Activation Strategies for Special Libraries to Enhance Cultural Welfare, 2023). These findings highlight the financial challenges in supporting staff and information resources for prison libraries. Previous studies have consistently emphasized the need for institutional and legal frameworks, sufficient budget allocations, adequate space, and the implementation of automated library systems to foster the development of these libraries (Kwon & Yoon, 2009). Sim (2023) stated that improving prison libraries requires the development of service guidelines, strengthening of professional organizations for library operations, and the inclusion of law libraries. In the United States, service guidelines have been established at state and regional levels, professional organizations for prison library services have been formed, and law

libraries are legally mandated to meet incarcerated individuals' diverse information needs (Sim, 2023).

While research on the development of prison libraries in South Korea, and successful international cases exists, studies that go beyond case studies to investigate the perspectives of those working in correctional facilities and related stakeholders remain scarce. Over the past five years (as of 2025), a search for "prison library (교정시설도서관)" on Google Scholar and Korea Citation Index identified only one domestic study (Sim, 2023). Sim (2023) examined trends in foreign prison library services in the United States, Europe, and Asia and South American countries through literature research. Furthermore, there was a lack of research regarding perspectives on external collaborators, such as volunteers. This study expands the scope by including collaborators to provide a more comprehensive analysis of prison library operations.

The various stakeholders would be the perspectives of volunteers, researchers, and prison library staff solely in South Korea. However, researchers faced difficulties in directly engaging with South Korean correctional facilities and their staff. Therefore, the scope of the study was expanded to include additional interviews with stakeholders from the United States to allow broader exploration of prison library systems and collaboration efforts and to draw insights from both contexts.

In addition, according to a study by Hussain et al. (2023), prison libraries in the United States, Australia, Europe, Asia, and Africa were not all free from problems related to collections, staffing, funding, technology, and collaboration. Nevertheless, in the

United States, some correctional offices have prepared guidelines for collections and formed ethnic collections (Hussain et al., 2023). In addition, Hussain et al. (2023) noted computer software and applications can be used for educational purposes, and cooperation between correctional facility libraries and public libraries is taking place. The study emphasized the necessity for other countries to adopt models from nations with well-structured institutional frameworks. The American Library Association (ALA) recently released the Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained (2024), providing operational guidelines. In states such as California and New York, prison library standards are codified into law (Hong, 2007).

Overall the United States presents a structured prison library system with active collaboration between public libraries and nonprofit organizations (Hong, 2007; Hussain et al., 2023; Sim, 2023). Considering these factors, this study examines stakeholder perspectives on prison libraries, the operational components, and the necessary considerations by interviewing stakeholders from both South Korea and the United States. While direct engagement with prison library staff in South Korea was limited, the study includes insights from researchers and other collaborators in Korea, alongside perspectives from U.S. prison library staff and affiliated stakeholders. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze and compare the operation status of prison libraries in both countries through interviews with South Korea and United States stakeholders to derive improvement measures applicable to South Korean prison libraries. The study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do prison library stakeholders perceive the libraries and other stakeholders?
- RQ2. What components are perceived as essential for the effective operation of a prison library?
- RQ3. What considerations should stakeholders take into account to activate prison libraries in the future?

## 2. Related Work

Research on prison libraries can be divided into studies concerning operational status, recommendations, and impacts on incarcerated individuals, with an overview of prior research from both South Korea and the United States, as well as broader domestic and international cases. Regarding studies on the operational status of prison libraries, Kwon and Yoon (2009) examined the operational status of correctional facility libraries in South Korea, assessing facilities, staffing, collection size, services, and budgets compared to international standards. Jeong and Song (2013) investigated the staff, area, collection, budget, and service of the correctional facility library to develop the evaluation index for the correctional facility library, and examined the appropriateness of the existing evaluation contents and evaluation indicators. The Dongduk Women's University Industry-Academy Collaboration Foundation (2023) analyzed 53 prison libraries nationwide, highlighting challenges such as space limitations, outdated collections, mismatches between reading preferences and available materials, and excessive administrative

burdens. Hussain et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of prison libraries worldwide and evaluated that prison libraries in the United States have a structured legal operational foundation, with active collaboration between public libraries and non-profit organizations. Through an analysis of prior research, it was found that while South Korea lacks the foundational infrastructure necessary for the practical operation of prison libraries, the United States has an established system in place.

Second, regarding research on recommendations for prison libraries, there has been research in both South Korea and in the United States. In South Korea, Jeong and Song (2013) developed library evaluation indicators consisting of planning, finance, service, book management, human resources, facilities, exchange and cooperation, among which high weight was placed on services, book management, and exchange and cooperation. Regarding research in the United States, Shirley (2006) analyzed challenges in U.S. prison libraries, particularly from the librarians' perspective. Despite regulations requiring staff allocation proportional to the number of incarcerated individuals, many facilities had either no staff or just one person in charge. She noted how rough the operational challenges the librarians faced during their work such as building quality collections, resources and services even though standards were settled. Additionally, librarians often encountered demands about censorship for the collection, balancing the librarian's mission of protecting prisoners' right to read and security (Shirley, 2006). Lehmann (2011) examined the challenges faced by U.S. prison li-

barriers and potential solutions. One major issue is the difficulty of building collections that meet the diverse needs of incarcerated individuals, who often have limited education and face socioeconomic disadvantages. Additionally, a key tension exists between institutional security regulations and library ethics, particularly regarding access to information (Lehmann, 2011). Lehmann (2011) address this; controlled digital platforms and structured educational initiatives have been proposed. Consequently, the primary challenge for South Korea is establishing a foundational framework for prison library operations, whereas in the United States, discussions focus on enhancing operational efficiency within an already established system.

Third, research on the impact of prison libraries on incarcerated individuals has primarily focused on education and psychological stability. Huh (2020) emphasized education for reintegration into society and resocialization, arguing that prison libraries should be utilized as spaces for education. Additionally, Huh (2020) explained that prison libraries should evolve into multifunctional spaces that provide culture, entertainment, and arts for incarcerated individuals. Garner (2020) revealed through interviews from Australia that the existence of prison libraries itself and reading provide psychological stability to incarcerated individuals. Garner (2020) argued that collecting these 'escape experiences,' which include both the physical escape of finding refuge in the library and the cognitive escape of immersing oneself in books, allows incarcerated individuals to explore their own development paths. Hong (2003) highlighted both the role

of prison libraries in rehabilitative education and their contribution to the psychological stability of incarcerated individuals. Hong (2003) further pointed out that existing educational programs in South Korean prison libraries are often impractical due to their failure to consider the characteristics and specific needs of incarcerated individuals. As a solution, Hong (2003) proposed the development of tailored programs designed for incarcerated individuals and active collaboration with public libraries, she concluded that these efforts could provide incarcerated individuals with opportunities for self-reflection and understanding, empowering them to restore their potential and successful reentry.

The distinctiveness of this research is the following: first, while existing domestic studies primarily relied on literature reviews and statistical data to analyze current conditions and problems, this study collected more empirical data through direct interviews with prison library stakeholders in both South Korea and the United States. Second, there is a commonality in that previous studies in South Korea and the United States primarily focused on the perspectives of library staff or incarcerated individuals. This study incorporated collaborators and captured the multi-layered perspectives of various stakeholders surrounding prison libraries. Third, previous studies in South Korea primarily addressed the lack of policies or facility shortages, whereas studies in the United States predominantly focused on operational challenges. This study aimed to comprehensively analyze the cases of both countries to propose development directions for South Korean prison libraries.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Data Collection

This research employed a collective case study approach using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore insights from stakeholders in South Korea and the United States. Both face-to-face and virtual interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, adapting Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) guidelines. Email-based interviews were conducted by sending question sheets to interviewees and receiving written responses, and additional printed documents were provided during face-to-face interviews. Interviews with US4-US9 were conducted by combining semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The focus group interview allowed participants to not only share individual experiences but also engage in spontaneous dialogue, responding to and building upon each other's perspectives. All interviewees were asked about their experience working in or collaborating with prison libraries, and their perception of other stakeholders involved in prison libraries. Additionally, thoughts on operations and collaboration in prison libraries were asked. While direct access to prison libraries and their staff was feasible in the United States, prison libraries in South Korea were subject to restricted access due to strict security protocols and administrative procedures.

To overcome access restrictions, data collection was conducted through the Information Disclosure Request system. The request to Information Disclosure

was submitted online by logging into the government-run website for information disclosure requests. Requests were submitted to six correctional facilities, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and the National Library of Korea. For each facility and institution, we prepared customized questionnaires based on Patton's (2015) qualitative research methodology, a common questionnaire was constructed to address experience/behavior, opinions/values, and background.

- 1) Services provided to incarcerated individuals
- 2) Government support for budget, space allocation, and staffing
- 3) Usage statistics and collection management practices
- 4) Potential areas for collaboration between correctional facilities and public libraries

The responses primarily confirmed existing national library statistics. Reports indicated that prison library programs were either non-existent or consisted of limited activities.

#### 3.2 Participants

Following Stake's (2000) qualitative research framework, this study implemented purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling. For U.S. participant recruitment, potential candidates were identified and contacted through online searches of regions with substantial prison library-related content and publicly available email addresses. In South Korea, researchers were contacted through public information and pro-

fessional networks after identification from academic publications and online searches.

The selection criteria, detailed in 'Reasons for Qualification,' focused on participants' relevant roles, experience, and expertise in prison libraries. Those serving at the same library shared similar fundamental job responsibilities and objectives, resulting in comparable interview questions. Therefore, in part of Table 1, Reasons for Qualification was described on a library-by-library basis rather than an individual basis. To ensure methodological feasibility, this research established specific exclusion criteria. Facilities were excluded if they either lacked structured library programs or if they had policies restricting student interviews. Based on these criteria, the research identified two main categories: library staff with direct operational experience and external collaborators with documented prison library partnerships. Prison library staff are responsible for the practical management of the library and are the group that best understands internal challenges and policy constraints. Collaborators, comprising officials from public libraries, research institutes, government agencies and NGOs, collaborate with prison libraries to expand information access and educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

Library staff members operated the prison libraries directly, while collaborators were external experts who contributed to prison library services. Tables 1 and 2 present participant information for the United States and South Korea respectively. Participants were assigned codes - "US" for the United States and "K" for South Korea. US1 and US2 participated

in facility tours followed by individual interviews. A group interview was conducted with six staff members (US4-US9) from one institution. K3 participated in two interviews - a written interview in June and a Zoom interview in September.

A total of 4 different libraries in the United States were examined. The libraries were coded as L1-L4 throughout this study to ensure anonymity.

L1 is a prison library in a rehabilitation center on the West Coast which has been serving incarcerated individuals since the mid-1800s. Librarians, volunteers, and incarcerated clerks are staff members.

L2 is a prison library in a juvenile detention center on the West Coast. L2 has been serving youth patrons between ages 12 and 17 awaiting adjudication which is the process of having a judge decide their case since the late-1900s. Librarians are staff members.

L3 is a public library located on the East Coast, one of several dozen branch libraries under the supervision of the Central Library, established in the early 1900s. Staff members of the outreach service organized in L3 have diverse backgrounds including librarians and students of library school.

L4 is a public library located on the West Coast, established in the last 1800s. Staff members of the outreach service organized in L4 to incarcerated individuals are librarians and assistants.

The data collection was conducted over three months, from June to September 2024, with a total of 18 participants: 12 from the United States and 6 from South Korea. Interviews were conducted via face-to-face (n=7), virtual (n=5), and email-based (n=4), averaging 107 minutes (SD=23.5).

〈Table 1〉 Interviewees based in the United States

#	Category	Occupation and Role	Library	Reasons for Qualification
US1	Prison Library Staff	Senior Prison Librarian	L1	- Established in a correctional facility - Provided diverse prison library services to incarcerated individuals
US2	Prison Library Staff	Prison Library Volunteer		
US3	Prison Library Staff	Specialized Prison Library Staff	L2	- Established in a correctional facility - Designed programs to support the incarcerated juvenile
US4	Collaborator	Inclusive Services Coordinator, Public Library	L3	- Provided outreach library services to correctional facilities - Provided library services to incarcerated individuals and their families
US5	Collaborator	Outreach Associate, Public Library		
US6	Collaborator	Outreach Assistant, Public Library		
US7	Collaborator	Family Connection Programs Assistant, Public Library		
US8	Collaborator	Family Connection Programs Associate, Public Library		
US9	Collaborator	Outreach Assistant, Public Library		
US10	Collaborator	Specialized Services Coordinator, Public Library	L4	- Provided outreach library services to correctional facilities - Supported information access and social reintegration for incarcerated individuals
US11	Collaborator	Non-profit Organizations Manager	None	Operated a nonprofit organization that provides books to incarcerated individuals
US12	Collaborator	Professor of Family Ecology/Clinical Psychology	None	Conducted research on services needed by incarcerated individuals and their children

〈Table 2〉 Interviewees based in the South Korea

#	Category	Occupation and Role	Reasons for Qualification
K1	Collaborator	Chairman, Government Library Committee	Worked on overseeing national library policies, including prison libraries, and coordinated interests among library stakeholders
K2	Collaborator	Secretary General, Professional Library Organization	Led research and projects aimed at advancing the Korean library system, including prison libraries
K3	Collaborator	Adjunct Professor of Library and Information Science	Published research on evaluation criteria for prison libraries
K4	Collaborator	Assistant Professor of Library Education	Conducted special lectures on bibliotherapy techniques for prison library staff
K5	Collaborator	Lecturer of Korean literature	Conducted bibliotherapy programs in correctional facilities
K6	Collaborator	Journalist	Published articles on prison libraries

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Grounded approach was used to analyze the collected data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, except in correctional facilities where electronic devices were prohibited or when recording was infeasible due to scheduling. In such cases, detailed handwritten notes were taken. Four researchers who were present in the interview open-coded all interview responses with constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interview data were analyzed systematically:

- 1) Thoroughly examining interview data to identify insights and generate topics,
- 2) Consolidating these topics into broader thematic categories (perception, system, collaboration) and refining them, and
- 3) Synthesizing findings across all interviews.

A codebook was developed by generating and refining initial codes. All transcripts and notes were cross-checked, and findings were derived through comparative analysis. Table 3 presents the codes identified in this process.

<Table 3> Codebook used for data analysis

Codes	Explanation
Perception	The views held by library staff and collaborators regarding the operations and collaborations of prison libraries. Perceptions can evolve from negative to positive. Positive perceptions include recognizing prison libraries' necessity and considering the needs of incarcerated individuals. Negative perceptions include indifference or public attitudes prioritizing punishment.
Prison Library System	Statements made regarding the way the library operates in correctional facilities. Staff, information resources, and institution support were all considered as a part of the system that can either be provided by the correctional facility itself or by external organizations, such as the government and other public libraries.
Information Resources and Value	Statements made regarding the information resource needs of incarcerated individuals. Examples include materials on education, employment, and legal matters, without restriction by genre. Statements made regarding the Information Value: The relevance of information resources, including its currency, diversity of genres, and alignment with incarcerated individuals' interests, demands, and needs.
Guidelines	Statements made regarding manuals used for operational standards for prison libraries. These may reflect stakeholder demands, regulations and provide criteria for various aspects, such as staff and operation.
Collaborative System	Statements made regarding activities conducted between collaborators and prison libraries, such as memorandums of understanding (MOUs), bibliotherapy, and staff training. This code also includes statements on external support, both human and materials provided to libraries. The system can be both robust and fragile, lasting from as long as 20 years to as short as a one-time occurrence.

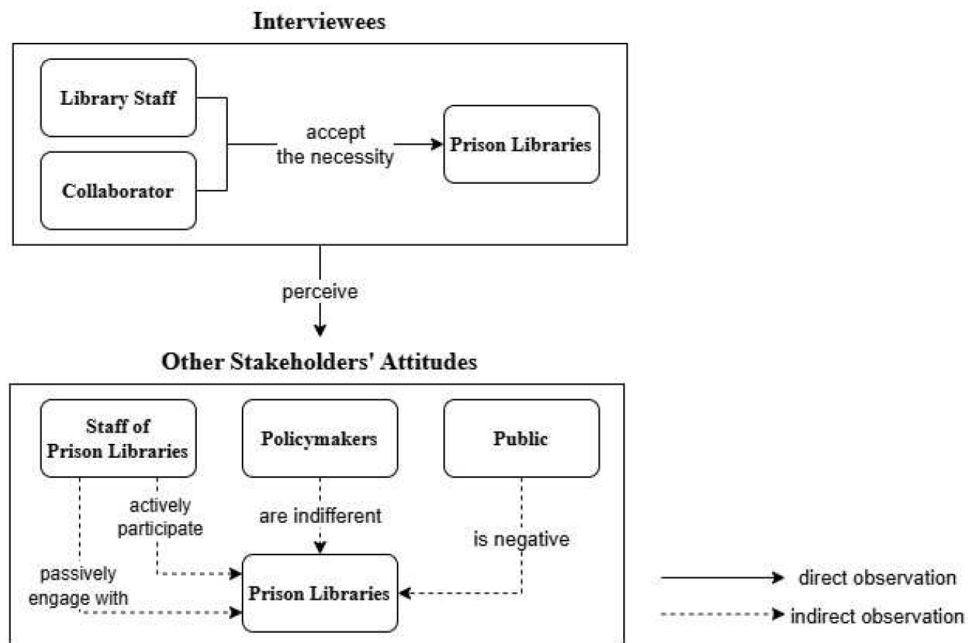
## 4. Findings

The main research findings on prison libraries are organized into three themes: stakeholders' perceptions, prison library system, and collaboration. The first theme 'Perception' discusses perceptions of library staff and collaborators toward prison libraries, other prison library staff, policymakers, and public perception. The second theme 'Prison library system' explores the prison library system in depth, focusing on librarians, information resources, institutional support and the relationship built. Finally, the third theme 'Collaboration' analyzes the collaborative systems of prison libraries in the United States and South Korea separately.

### 4.1 South Korea and United States stakeholders' perception of prison libraries

The stakeholders were asked about their thoughts on prison libraries and their perceptions toward other stakeholders' views on these libraries based on their experiences. The analysis focused on how the interviewees perceived the attitudes of other stakeholders, including prison library staff, policymakers, and the general public, towards prison libraries. Perceptions about prison libraries can be summarized as Figure 1.

Perceptions of prison libraries from the library staff and collaborators from the United States and South Korea were revealed directly to the researchers.



〈Figure 1〉 Stakeholders perception on prison libraries

Their perception toward other stakeholders' attitudes (staff of other prison libraries, policymakers, the public) unfold together during the interviews. Therefore, perceptions of 18 stakeholders are clearly articulated, while perceptions of other prison library staff, policymakers, and public are observed through our participants' lenses. Solid arrows and dashed arrows are used to distinguish the manner of observation.

#### 4.1.1 Stakeholders' perception about the prison library

The stakeholders shared their thoughts on the necessity of the prison library and their impact on incarcerated individuals. The majority of the stakeholders responded that prison libraries positively contribute to society by alleviating the psychological distress of incarcerated individuals and reducing recidivism rates. US3, who worked in a juvenile detention center, stated that stability by the "identity as a reader" from the prison library is "the great benefit." US10 emphasized that prison libraries are "absolutely essential" because incarcerated individuals can receive equal treatment similar to that in public libraries. Similarly, US12 forecasted, "There's less mental health concerns, there's less behavioral infractions, there are less chances of recidivism." US2 evaluated the prison library programs as those that "help broaden incarcerated individuals' horizons and provide them with access to creative or intellectual outlets." Additionally, K3 viewed the traditional library system as sufficient to function suitably with incarcerated individuals through psychological programs and informational

networks.

Thus, the stakeholders we interviewed all recognized the prison library as exceptional spaces within the highly restrictive environment of correctional facilities, where incarcerated individuals are treated equally. Overall, the interviewees demonstrated an understanding of the necessity, importance, and impact of the prison library.

#### 4.1.2 Stakeholders' perception about prison library's staffs

The stakeholders we interviewed perceived other prison library staff varying in engagement levels. According to our interviewees, while most staff were perceived to actively participate in their duties, some were perceived as passive and less engaged.

Some interviewees from South Korea shared that a few fellow library staff did not recognize the need for prison library programs (K4, K5, K6). K6 recounted hearing the statement, "Just reading books doesn't change a person." While passive staff were also present in the United States, they had opportunities for their perspectives to evolve over time. The interviewees from L3, who support regional prison libraries and incarcerated individuals, described when they developed programs supporting video calls between incarcerated individuals and their families, encountering a fellow who stated, "who didn't know why we were doing [program] and thought we shouldn't be doing [program]." However, US8 noted that over the years, the program expanded to 10 facilities, with increasingly positive responses from staff.

South Korean prison library staff were also unwilling about sharing information regarding the state of prison libraries or cooperating with research efforts. K6 highlighted “The majority of interview requests were declined. Many internal staff members showed little interest in library-related tasks,” when she wrote an article. Additionally, K4 stated how he had to secure cooperation from correctional facilities through the Korea Correctional Service as the correctional facility and its staff were not welcoming of his research on programs for incarcerated individuals. Some staff related to prison libraries were passively involved in activities targeting incarcerated individuals, despite the potential of such programs to yield positive outcomes. This was evident through K5’s experiences of encountering two contrasting styles of correctional facility staff. He reminisced about the officer who frequently communicated about a reading program that won an award, while the replacement officer showed little interest by discontinuing communication.

#### 4.1.3 Stakeholders’ perception about policymakers

The interviewees of South Korea stated that policymakers are indifferent to prison libraries. K3 remarked, “First, policymakers must show interest to secure funding, and only with funding can personnel be recruited. Systemic improvements are necessary,” emphasizing that the interest of policymakers is essential to revitalizing the prison library. K6 added that policymakers’ awareness of the necessity of the prison library could lead to the actual allocation of

budgets. K4 also agreed with the importance of changing laws as the first step, so that the budget and personnel could be assigned according to the law.

Interviewees from South Korea also stated how amending the law is insufficient, requiring more detailed adjustments and attention. K2 stated that treating prison libraries as public libraries failed to account for their restricted access and unique operational environment. Recognizing these issues, the law was revised in 2022 to separate special libraries, including prison libraries, from public libraries. However, despite this second revision, K1, considering the 4th Library Development Plan (2024-2028), stated that prison libraries are still not regarded as a policy priority.

The interviewees from the United States faced similar challenges. US5 described how policymakers show limited interest in prison libraries, sharing a case where a council member in L3’s district proposed legislation for prison library spaces, unaware that these services already existed in their area. According to US10, prison libraries received funding through public library programs, but meaningful government support remains inadequate.

#### 4.1.4 Stakeholders’ perception about public perception

The stakeholders we interviewed identified public perception as a critical factor in driving changes within the prison library. K1 argued that the government should play a role in changing the public’s perspective through education, so that it can organize and implement a budget for the prison library. When

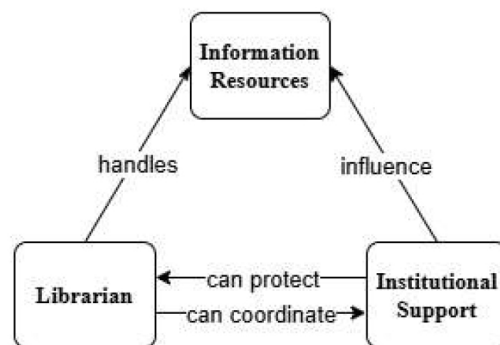
asked about the priority between legal revision and awareness improvement, K3 stated that it would be natural for social awareness improvement to come first, leading to legal revision, although this ideal sequence does not reflect current reality.

Furthermore, interviewees reported that public perception is not only indifferent but also negative (US7, US10, K1, K2, K4, K6). K2 stated reading books in a correctional facility is considered meaningless by the perception of the Korean public. She pointed out incarcerated individuals are “isolated and disconnected from society and they are expected to be reformed,” they are perceived by the public as “subjects of punishment and confinement.” Similarly, K1 emphasized the severity of this negative perception, noting that public attitudes toward incarcerated individuals remain particularly cold and unwelcoming. Additionally, he suggested to have “Compassion and Inclusivity”, by seeing incarcerated individuals as neighbors, friends, or family. US3 expressed the hope that society would take the existence of prison libraries for granted, posing the question, “Why shouldn’t prison libraries exist?”. US11 stated that helping incarcerated individuals is the responsibility of society as a whole and urged a shift in public perception.

## 4.2 Elements constituting the prison library system

In this section, three kinds of resources the prison library system required emerged as themes in the interview data: librarians, information resources, and

institutional support. Stakeholders’ thoughts on the expertise required, the characteristics of the information resources to be provided, and the supporting systems were identified. The prison library system in correctional facilities can be summarized as Figure 2.



〈Figure 2〉 Prison library system

According to the Library Act Article 7 (Responsibilities of Libraries), the library system is composed of librarians and information resources (2022, Act No.18547). However, the interview findings revealed that many stakeholders emphasized that institutional support also has a significant impact on the library system and operations (US3, US12, K1, K2, K3). Therefore, this study included institutional support as part of the prison library system, and analyzed the relationships and interactions between the librarian, information resources, and institutional support in the context of correctional facility libraries.

### 4.2.1 Librarian

The first theme in the prison library system is

librarian. The competencies of staff needed for the successful operation of prison libraries were discussed in the interview data. This subsection will explain the stakeholder's perceptions of librarians in the prison library system and their thoughts regarding qualifications.

Interviewees who work in or collaborate with prison libraries in the United States agreed that librarians are the most qualified professionals. Interviewees (US3, US4, US10, US11) noted that stakeholders of prison libraries often impose their demands and rules, leading to frequent conflicts. US10 remarked that prison librarians can be "amazing", but it is difficult to be "a good librarian" while adhering to all the rules that the prison imposes on them at the same time. Furthermore, US3 explained that many U.S. prison libraries effectively coordinate diverse opinions because of librarians, despite outdated or minimal standards and facility guidelines. US3 emphasized, "A librarian should be in the library. Beyond daily tasks, they explain to stakeholders why this [prison libraries] matter." According to interviewees (US1, US3), librarians' expertise enables them to collaborate with various stakeholders and effectively communicate the prison library's role and value. US3 also noted that "finding that balance between meeting the incarcerated individuals' needs and concerns about inappropriate content" is a critical issue. She explained that if incarcerated individuals request violent material, librarians must clarify why it's inappropriate.

Comparatively, K1 pointed out there are currently no librarians who can serve as "intermediaries be-

tween incarcerated individuals and prison library's resources". K2 defined expertise as "knowledge about materials that others do not possess" but she noted that South Korean prison libraries assign general correctional facility staff to manage library operations, who are unqualified instead of librarians. K4 remarked, "Assigned staff may handle library tasks, but they lack expertise, making it incredibly difficult to manage alongside their primary responsibilities," voicing concerns about assigning prison library duties regardless of expertise. K2 stated, "Prison libraries lack a clearly established role or status." explaining the absence of librarians.

#### 4.2.2 Information Resources

The second theme in the prison library system was information resources available in prison libraries. US10 emphasized that accessible information resources are crucial for meeting the needs of incarcerated individuals and planning their future, with K1 also acknowledging their necessity. Tangible materials such as books, brochures, and computers were major offerings throughout L1 - L4. The interview data highlighted three features of these resources: various genres, legal content, and up-to-date information.

The interviewees in the United States stated that prison libraries should provide not only rehabilitation-related information but also a variety of resources to assist in reentry. This includes not only education or employment resources but also, as in public libraries, recreational and romance materials, suggesting that any resources should be provided without restrictions (US1, US6, US10, US11).

US10 noted that incarcerated individuals could learn to see other worlds through stories like fantasy, and this could inspire hope. US11 identified a gap in meeting the needs of women with children in existing prison libraries and provided information on parenting as a solution. Only K2 mentioned specific content among South Korean interviewees, she wished to have books for “comfort (위로)”, recalling incarcerated person who had been victims of the domestic violence.

K3 stated, “Legal assistance services are very practical and functionally important services.” He suggested enabling incarcerated individuals to directly access legal resources via the internet, reflecting the current lack of such services in South Korea. Significantly, we could observe how this idea works pragmatically with libraries in the United States. For example, in L1, a dedicated clerk for legal collection and service was assigned. Papers of up-to-date regulations, contact of bar association, databases and as well as legal collection have been activated to all visitors. L3 was preparing to provide legal services such as expungement clinics through partnership, so individuals after release could be able to adapt to changes in the law and clear criminal records.

Additionally, interviewees in the United States highlighted the significance of up-to-date resources, as US10 noted “So just trying to have a range of books and have them be relevant to people and new or as new as possible would be really, really important.” US12 also emphasized the need to “always have new books and the best books” as well as various topics. Whereas, recency was not recognized in South Korea

interview data. K2 expressed disappointment about information resources and the environment of prison libraries in South Korea. She pointed out the collection is deficient in new books, and the overall quality of the materials is subpar, so it is complicated to assess the quality.

#### 4.2.3 Institutional Support

The final theme in the prison library system is institutional support. In order for the prison library system to operate smoothly, institutional support for staff and information resources must be guaranteed. Institutional support includes laws and operational guidelines prepared by the government, which provide formal standards for library staff and correctional facilities to follow.

Guidelines play an important role in the operation of prison libraries by supplementing outdated standards and providing direction to practitioners. Representative examples include the Departmental Operations Manual (CDCR), the Facility Guide, and the LA Juvenile Correctional Facility Guide (US1, US3). US1 said that L1’s guidelines provide specific criteria for evaluating information resources and services in the prison library. These criteria included support for educational programs, acceptance of leisure reading activities, provision of essential legal materials, and compliance with library-related state regulations. In addition, federal law in the United States mandated the installation of legal libraries in all correctional facilities. This ensured that incarcerated individuals can access the legal information resources they need.

On the other hand, in South Korea, the government or library-related organizations lacked specific operational guidelines for prison libraries. K2 pointed out that despite many incarcerated individuals eventually returning to society, the government's lack of interest resulted in lack of laws or guidelines to support prison libraries. K2 also emphasized that the policy foundation to support national-level research is not stable. She suggested that MOJ and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) cooperate to come up with basic operational guidelines for prison libraries. K3 emphasized that the operational guidelines are not just for library operations but can also serve to protect the rights of library staff, including librarians.

### 4.3 Collaboration for activating the operation of the prison library

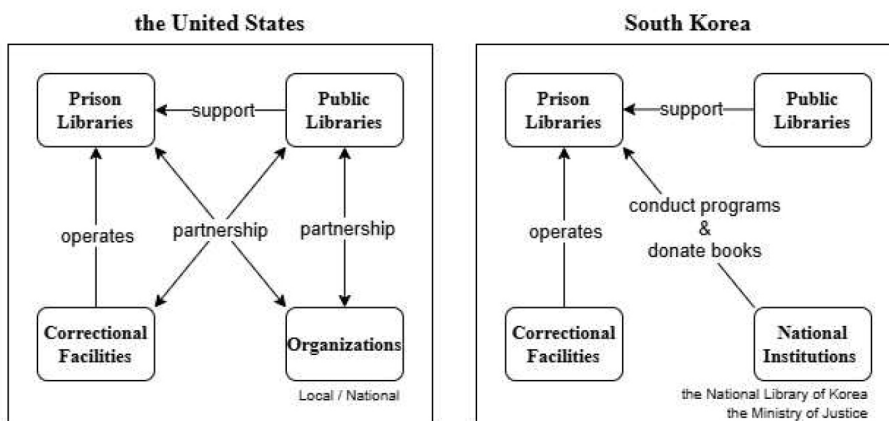
This section reports on the collaborative systems aimed at revitalizing prison libraries in the United

States and South Korea. It examines the current situation and explores the stakeholders' perceptions of future direction. Collaborative systems in both the United States and South Korea can be summarized as Figure 3.

Entities of collaboration were identified by the interview data and response from the requests to information disclosure. Prison libraries, public libraries, and correctional facilities are common parties in both the United States and South Korea; however, the type of external organizations differs. Two types of organizations are observed during research: local and national. Notably, local organizations did not appear as partners in prison libraries in South Korea, only national organizations were identified.

#### 4.3.1 Collaborative system of the United States

Stakeholders of prison libraries in the United States that we interviewed stated to support incarcerated individuals and operated various tailored programs



〈Figure 3〉 Prison library centered collaborative systems in the United States and South Korea

through collaboration with correctional authorities and local communities. We examine the collaborative systems, analyzing the specific cases of the libraries represented by the interviewees. The cases of L1, L2, L3, and L4 are reported sequentially, followed by an analysis of the common themes that emerge across cases of the interviewees from the United States.

L1 provides legal resources and recreational materials with a focus on reentry, rehabilitation, self-help, and topics related to jobs and vocations. Professional librarians, volunteers, and incarcerated individuals serving as library clerks together constitute L1. Collaboration with incarcerated individuals is a key feature. L1 has a separate legal collection managed by an incarcerated library clerk, who acts as a bridge between other incarcerated individuals and the law collection in the prison library. Additionally, they participate in various library tasks, including equipment labeling, barcoding, and repair work.

L2 has maintained collaborative systems with external organizations for over 20 years. For example, cooking programs, STEM education, play performance, and workshops were held continuously. US3 emphasized that the more networks there are, the better, highlighting the importance of “relationship building” to secure funding through these networks. She noted the importance of building relationships with young individuals, within the institution, and outside collaborators. She emphasized the importance of sustaining collaboration (“brief or temporary, may be beneficial in the moment, but if it is not sustained, its value quickly dissipates”). So, she

remarked that, rather than focusing solely on “what is needed”, “the way in which it is to be implemented” has become increasingly important. Therefore, the young individuals could be connected with the local community through steady collaborative systems and therefore to receive help continuously after reentry.

L3 supports local correctional facilities with book carts or popup libraries. US5 explained that this is possible thanks to donations from numerous organizations and libraries, including books and other resources. L3 also provides various specialized services developed in-house for incarcerated individuals. They use library facilities to connect incarcerated individuals with their families via video calls, especially in situations where visits are difficult. Additionally, they provide opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to connect and build their own communities to aid successful reentry. L3 is planning to expand its services by forming more partnerships with external organizations.

L4 conducts a specialized team which dedicates library service to incarcerated individuals. The team holds three main tasks: book carts, reference services, and programs that support reentry. Answering reference questions covers a range from simple queries, such as lyrics and images, to complex queries, such as starting a business. Even after release, L4 supports incarcerated individuals to access resources and programs. US10, who is the manager of the team, stated that public librarians operated based on “what can we do for you?” highlighting meetings with incarcerated individuals to identify their needs.

Commonalities were found by the four libraries

mentioned above and cases of two collaborators (US11, US12) in the United States. First, in addition to books, various external resources – including funding, reentry guides, and programs – are delivered to incarcerated individuals through collaborative systems. These resources range from informational materials provided by local bookstores to broad nationwide support from organizations such as the Mellon Foundation, Amazon, and Sesame Street. Second, all libraries were closely tied to their parent organization which is the correctional facility itself but showed difficulties regarding collaboration. Interviewees who had established collaborations with correctional facilities stated that forming partnerships required years of consistent effort (US3, US11). US11 explained that diverse mandates from state, federal, and individual prisons make it more challenging to access correctional facilities and to determine what they permit or prohibit.

#### 4.3.2 Collaborative system of South Korea

Stakeholders of prison libraries in South Korea faced difficulties in building partnerships based on mutual goals and long-term collaboration with prison libraries. This section examines how these difficulties arose and explores a vision for establishing sustainable and solid collaborative systems in South Korea. As shown in Section 4.2, effective prison library systems require the integration of librarians, information resources, and institutional support. The cases linked to three kinds of resources (librarian, information, institutional support) of the prison library system are reported sequentially, followed by

an analysis of cases in South Korea.

The first element of collaborative systems in South Korea was the librarian. The National Library of Korea collaborates with MOJ and the Judicial Research and Training Institute to conduct an annual “Mobile Librarian Training” program aimed at revitalizing prison library operations, but the extent to which the training is utilized remains unclear (Request to Information Disclosure). K3 pointed out that the Mobile Librarian Training is typically held as a one-time event, which is insufficient for establishing professional services. K1 proposed the idea of “establishing a librarian exchange system” and “enhancing collaboration with national and public institutions to activate the use of diverse reading programs.” He suggested the possibility of introducing online services and librarian-led education in collaboration with local public libraries. Additionally, K3 cited the Halden Prison Library in the Netherlands as an example, suggesting that a prison library could belong to a local public library jurisdiction to receive assistance from professional librarians.

The second element of collaborative systems in South Korea was information resources. K4, who provides reading education and conducts research at various correctional facilities, stated, “Books just keep coming in, but there’s no place to put them, so they’re piled up like this. Some of them are even left unopened in boxes,” highlighting the challenges of managing donated books and their limited utilization. K3 also indicated that most of the books are donated from organizations as a bunch so the collection’s condition is worn out, and lack of information value consequently. For legal information

resources, K2 noted the National Assembly Library and Supreme Court Library of Korea can take the role of providing legal assistance services and to do follow-up research, but she observed there is not enough attention and structure for collaboration yet.

The third element of collaborative systems in South Korea was institutional support. Interviewees primarily emphasized the role of the government and national institutions in improving prison libraries (K1, K2, K3, K4). K3 stated that “we need the power to strategically move MOJ and correctional authorities through lawmakers.” It was revealed above that the collaborative system aimed at librarians and information resources was not robust, but K4 stated a simple logic that can address this issue promptly: “Collaboration is easy. Why do I say it’s easy? Because institutions like the National Library of Korea fall under MCST. Since both MCST and MOJ are government agencies, when official documents are sent between them, collaboration happens smoothly.” He proposed designing a government-level collaboration system as a solution to the challenges of partnering with prison libraries, which are difficult for the public to access due to complex entry procedures.

In South Korea, two collaborative cases were identified in the interview. Case 1 is a reading therapy program led by the Korea Publication Ethics Commission, with 25 prisons implementing sessions under its leadership. K5 confirmed that some were conducted in person but remained one-time events. Case 2 is an initiative between MOJ and the Korea Publication Industry Promotion Agency, allowing correctional facilities to apply for sessions annually.

In 2022, one prison held an online session with external instructors, confirmed through a Request for Information Disclosure. However, this too was a one-time event and did not become permanent. K5 also noted that permanent collaboration was hindered by multiple challenges, including budget constraints from the Korea Publication Ethics Commission.

## 5. Discussion

This study aims to provide significant insights into understanding prison libraries in South Korea and the United States. To achieve this, it examines how prison library stakeholders perceive prison libraries and other stakeholders (RQ1), what components are perceived as essential for the effective operation of a prison library (RQ2), and what considerations stakeholders can take into account to activate prison libraries in the future (RQ3). This section discusses the research questions in relation to previous studies and interview findings, and suggests possible directions for improvement.

### 5.1 Stakeholders’ Perceptions

Regarding RQ1 (How do prison library stakeholders perceive the libraries and other stakeholders?), interviewees generally recognized the necessity of prison libraries; however, some stakeholders held negative views. Some correctional facility staff, policymakers, and segments of the public expressed skepticism toward prison libraries. This finding suggests that pre-

vious theoretical discussions emphasizing the positive impact of prison libraries have not yet been fully reflected in policies or social attitudes. This aligns with the data from the Dongduk Women's University Industry-Academy Collaboration Foundation (2023) where correctional facility staff responsible for library operations expressed skepticism regarding the library's reading (rehabilitation) programs.

In addition, the interview noted that in order to improve the South Korean prison libraries, it is urgent to revise the law that guarantees minimum standards before improving social awareness, emphasizing the role of the policymaker. The United States and South Korea cases provide valuable insights into how local policymakers can make a difference. In both countries, local policymakers have stepped forward to improve prison libraries - from a council member in L3's district who tried to create new library legislation to a council member in South Korea who visited a prison library firsthand (Gyeonggido Assembly, 2024). These actions show how local policymakers can bridge the gap between communities and correctional institutions. Since correctional facilities often face NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) resistance, a top-down approach appears promising: local policymakers can lead change by showing interest, helping their communities understand the value of prison libraries, and pushing for policy changes at higher levels.

To overcome these limitations and promote the activation of prison libraries, South Korean interviewees particularly emphasized the importance of policymakers' interest and support. This result aligns

with the findings of the Dongduk Women's University Industry-Academy Collaboration Foundation (2023), which highlighted the necessity of legal and institutional policy support for prison libraries. The importance of considering qualitative factors, based on the specific needs of incarcerated individuals, is further augmented through interviews, in addition to the quantitative indicators proposed in previous evaluation (Jeong & Song, 2013; Korean Library Association, Special Committee on Korean Library Standards, 2013) tried to measure. Additionally, education and public awareness programs are needed to help the public perceive prison libraries as tools for rehabilitation and social reintegration. Such programs should undergo continuous evaluation and feedback processes to ensure their effectiveness in shifting public perception.

## 5.2 Essential Components for the Effective Operation of a Prison Library

In response to RQ2 (What components are perceived as essential for the effective operation of a prison library?), we identified librarians, information resources, and institutional support as fundamental components for prison library operations, comparing the differences between South Korea and the United States.

One of the main differences was the existence of professional librarians. In the United States, professional librarians manage prison libraries, whereas in South Korea, correctional facility staff are respon-

sible for library operations, often lacking professional expertise. A gap in the diversity and currency of information resources also existed. In the United States, a variety of materials were provided, and law libraries were mandated to meet incarcerated individuals' information needs (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d.; Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, n.d.). In contrast, South Korea relied heavily on donated books, which often have limited informational value and are inadequately managed.

The issue pertains to the diversity and currency of collections, which are important and identified by Jeong and Song (2013) as key evaluation factors. Our findings delved deeper into what diverse resources may look like, such as not just educational resources (law, job search) but also comforting resources such as books that show the lives of people outside of prison. Lastly, institutional support differed. While the United States had state-specific operational guidelines, ensuring a systematic management approach, South Korea lacked standardized guidelines, leading to inconsistencies in prison library operations.

This research demonstrates a novel analytical framework within prison library libraries. By examining institutional support as a core element, it reveals critical relationships between operational components. The study proposes several key recommendations. Primarily, the implementation of specialized educational programs and support for librarian certification is essential to ensure baseline professional competency among library personnel. Through this initiative, operational professionalism is enhanced, fa-

ilitating improved coordination among diverse stakeholders. Secondly, the study suggests expanding information resources accessibility through tablet integration, following the L1 model, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and meeting diverse informational requirements of the incarcerated individuals. Third, the establishment of standardized operational guidelines and evaluation metrics at the national level, coupled with systematic post-implementation assessments, is recommended for sustainable development. The implementation of these strategic improvements would facilitate equilibrium among system components and establish a robust framework for effective operation.

### 5.3 Considerations for Activating Prison Libraries in the Future

In response to RQ3 (What considerations should stakeholders take into account to activate prison libraries in the future?), this study identifies collaboration and engagement with local communities as key considerations for activating prison libraries. A notable finding is that the collaborative structures in South Korea and the United States differ significantly, with U.S. prison libraries adopting a more diverse range of collaboration models.

In the United States, prison libraries collaborate not only with public libraries and organizations but also with volunteers, incarcerated individuals, and bookstores to expand information access and services. In contrast, South Korea's prison libraries primarily depend on government-led collaborations, making lo-

cal engagement efforts limited. As a result, prison libraries in South Korea face structural challenges in leading collaborative efforts with local communities.

Hong (2003) emphasized that external collaboration can supplement human and material resources in prison libraries. However, past collaboration attempts in South Korea have been short-term and fragmented, making it difficult to measure their effectiveness. Therefore, this study proposes establishing a collaborative network among correctional facilities, public libraries, academia, and NGOs to foster long-term partnerships. At the initial stage, small-scale projects should be implemented to test and refine collaborative frameworks, gradually addressing staff shortages, budget constraints, and service quality issues. Ultimately, establishing a structured and sustainable collaboration model among various stakeholders is essential for the long-term viability and effective operation of prison libraries.

In order to improve the operation of prison libraries, a clear division of roles between national institutions, public libraries, and correctional facilities is needed, rather than just a single collaboration aiming for expansion of support. To this end, this study proposes the following approach:

- National institutions (e.g., MOJ, MCST, National Library Committee): To establish standard operating guidelines at the national level (or revise and amend the 2013 edition of the Korean Library Standards) and increase budget support.
- Public libraries: To develop a collaborative model with prison libraries in the same area

and engage in material donations and staff training.

- Correctional facilities: To consider forming an independent library operation organization within the facility, avoid assigning staff with dual responsibilities, and appoint professional librarians.

While there were no professional librarians in prison libraries in South Korea, as seen in the case of L1, incarcerated clerks and volunteers are part of the operation of the prison library. Therefore, it is meaningful to consider having many supportive individuals as staff.

## 6. Conclusion

This study conducted a case study involving 18 stakeholders (six from South Korea and twelve from the United States). However, the imbalance in the number of interviewees between the two countries posed a limitation in achieving a fully balanced comparison of perspectives. Additionally, the absence of interviews with correctional facility officials may have resulted in an incomplete representation of the institutional stance on prison libraries. These limitations should be addressed in future research. Future studies may include more diverse Korean stakeholders to make a balance and relevance to the circumstances of Korean correctional facilities.

Nevertheless, this study is significant in that it explores the perspectives of stakeholders in South

Korea and the United States, providing a comprehensive understanding of the operation and development of prison libraries. By examining stakeholders' perceptions, key operational components, and considerations for library activation, this study offers practical improvement strategies for South Korean prison libraries, helping them play a more substantial role in society. Furthermore, this research is expected to serve as a foundational reference for future studies on prison libraries and contribute to guiding the direction of future research in this field.

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