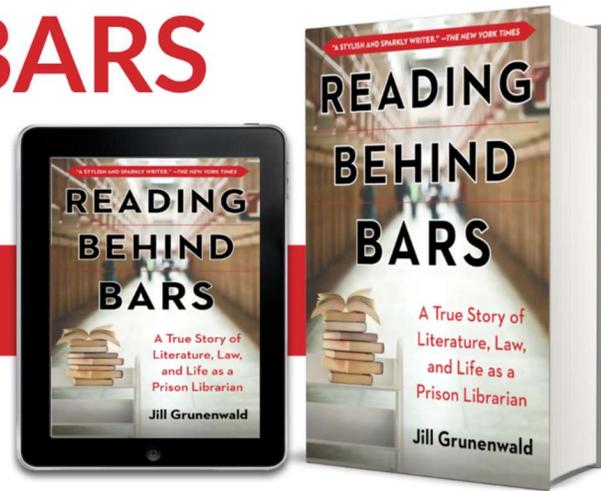


# READING BEHIND BARS

## Letter from the author



Dear Readers,

Before taking the job at the prison, I had a very narrow understanding of what it meant to be incarcerated. Perhaps, more to the point, I had a very narrow understanding of *who* ends up incarcerated. The men I worked with called it “catching a case,” as if they were just walking down the street and someone tossed a grenade in their direction and they were the unlucky victim who put their hand out.

I know that makes it sound as if they are passing blame, but the truth of the matter is that any one of us could catch a case under the right circumstances. Especially when it comes to nonviolent crimes, like drinking and driving. The only difference between you and the men I worked with is you were lucky enough to make it home safely.

According to data from the non-profit organization Prison Policy Initiative, the United States of America locks up more people per capita than any other nation. Roughly 700 per 100,000 residents. And while the United States makes up only 5 percent of total global population, the 2 million persons incarcerated in jails, prisons, and detention centers in our country account for 25 percent of all inmates in the entire world.

Of that, 1 in 5 are incarcerated on a drug conviction charge and an average of half a million people are incarcerated for nonviolent drug convictions on any given day. In fact, there are 1 million drug possession arrests every year, and there are 6 times as many arrests for drug possessions as there are for drug sales. Research from the NAACP illustrates that drug usage rates among African Americans and whites is similar, but the imprisonment rates of African Americans are nearly 6 times that of whites. On average, African Americans make up only 13 percent of drug users but 33 percent of those incarcerated for drug offenses.

It’s not that African Americans are more likely to possess and sell drugs, but they are more likely to be *punished* for possessing and selling drugs. The war on drugs has created a racially biased system that impacts and incarcerates African American offenders at far greater rates than white offenders.

To adapt a phrase from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, “All men are unlucky, but some men are more unlucky than others.”

There is no one “type” of person who ends up behind bars. That said, there are some indicators that can predict a path to prison and one of the biggest is literacy rates: the One World Literacy Foundation found that 2/3 of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare.

I was fortunate to work at a facility that encouraged use of the library, and while I was working under a non-existent budget and had to rely entirely on donations, those in administration supported books and reading among the men under our care. Not all prison libraries are as lucky and it seems like every few months I’m hearing about another state that has instituted a policy that dramatically reduces the number and types of books available to prisoners. These policies are usually swiftly reversed after public outcry, but even to institute them at all shows a severe lack of understanding when it comes to the importance of books in prison.

Reading provides immeasurable tools that extend far beyond our ability to keep ourselves entertained for a few hours with a compelling story. It’s not hyperbolic to say that reading changes lives, and not being able to read can cause crisis in a person’s life. The National Center for Education Statistics found that incarcerated adults struggle with literacy and numeracy at far greater rates than average adults in the United States. More than half read at a level so low they are unable to perform the most basic tasks needed to be a successful member of society, such as pursuing higher education, making informed medical decisions, and holding a job.

When we talk about recidivism rates, what we are ultimately talking about is reading rates, which is why access to education and literature is so incredibly important for the men and women incarcerated in our country.

And it starts with the prison library.

Jill Grunenwald



@Jill\_Grun



Facebook.com/JillGrunenwaldBooks



@Jill\_Grun