

Ron Humphrey, editor for *Inside Journal*, a tabloid-format newspaper published by Prison Fellowship ([www.pfm.org](http://www.pfm.org)), describes issues in publishing for incarcerated readers like the one pictured here.



## PUBLISH FOR A VIOLENT AUDIENCE

**I**nside *Journal* gets the readers no one wants: murderers, rapists, child molesters, bank robbers and car thieves. Its target audience is the 2 million men and women who will spend tonight behind bars in American prisons. One can scarcely imagine a readership with a greater history and potential for violence.

### *A truly captive audience*

Of those currently incarcerated in the United States, more than 90 percent will one day be released back into the community—a whopping 600,000 in 2003 alone. Studies show that 70 percent of these will be charged with a new crime within three years of their release. One objective of *Inside Journal* is to

reduce that number by teaching Christian values and providing suggestions on finding employment.

There are roughly equal numbers of Caucasian and African-Americans in prison, as well as a rising minority of Hispanics. Women account for about six percent of the prison population, but that number is rising. Another disturbing trend is

the increasing number of incarcerated juveniles, who are often among the most violent and difficult prisoners. With mandatory minimum sentences and the abolishment of parole in many U.S. states, prison populations are aging at the same time that they are becoming younger.

*Inside Journal* makes a sincere effort to reach the 90 percent of the prison population that never visits the chapel. Fewer than 10 percent of prisoners today attend any form of religious programming—in the macho world of prison survival, visiting the chapel for any reason is often taken as a sign of personal weakness that can be exploited by other inmates.

### **Content for prisoners**

Every copy of *Inside Journal* presents a Bible study and the plan of salvation. The newspaper features interviews with Christian celebrities admired by prisoners. Many are sports figures. *Inside Journal* recently interviewed St. Louis Rams football player Kurt Warner who eloquently spoke of his need for a relationship with God in order to succeed on and off the field.

A person who wakes up behind prison walls each morning does not have to be a rocket scientist to feel he or she is a loser. Without positive reinforcement, the self-esteem of prisoners rapidly deteriorates. In response, *Inside Journal* carries articles in which prisoners are praised for good deeds while in prison.

For example, in the western part of the United States, thousands of prisoners are trained to fight wildfires. During the fire season they leave their prison cells for forested mountain camps. When fire comes, the inmates—both men and women—stand shoulder-to-shoulder with professional firefighters. They often tackle hot spots the civilians avoid. A fire season rarely passes that one or more inmate firefighters are not killed while on the fire line. *Inside Journal* highlights their heroic efforts.

Articles also focus on inmates' family life, offering suggestions on how incarcerated parents can relate

to their children and on how to keep a marriage together. The divorce rate for married prisoners is a staggering 85 percent, and half of the successful marriages will fail within a year after the prisoner's release.

Crime does run in families. Children with one or both parents in jail are six times more likely to end up in prison themselves one day. One prison official at a women's facility said she had seen an inmate give birth to a daughter and years later, the daughter was serving time at the same prison. Another told about a grandmother, mother and daughter, all at the same prison.

The only significant disagreement from inmates about content arose last year when *Inside Journal* ran—without comment—an article describing the differences between Christianity and Islam. A number of Americans who have converted to Islam while incarcerated wrote to protest what they considered unfavorable reporting about their new religion. In-prison conversion to Islam, especially by African-Americans, has been growing in the U.S.

### **Restrictions**

In getting to its readers, *Inside Journal* must clear many gatekeepers, all of them employed by the corrections system. That imposes certain requirements other publications do not face.

*Inside Journal* never presents crime in a positive manner. It must not criticize the authorities, especially prison staff. Editors take care to omit any material that might help an inmate make weapons, explosives, poison, or "Pruno," a commonly-brewed illicit alcohol product. Despite these precautions, the tabloid has at times been banned from facilities where some thought it was too helpful to inmates; so far, Prison Fellowship has been able to convince the authorities to eventually relent.

One editor is an ex-prisoner who can provide an insider's perspective. Even so, at one point the publication received several complaints from prison officials. Inmates were reportedly using the most heavily-

inked sections of *Inside Journal* to create tattoos. Prison Fellowship staff were skeptical, but changed the ink anyway. Changing production parameters is costly, but unless prison staff are satisfied, inmates will not receive the paper.

*Inside Journal* costs \$30,000 an issue to edit, publish and mail. All funding comes from donors who support Prison Fellowship on a regular basis. At times an individual will choose to underwrite an entire issue. There is no advertising in the newspaper.

Print runs vary. For fire safety reasons, large quantities of the newspaper cannot be stocked at the prison and older issues must be destroyed as newer ones arrive. *Inside Journal* staff stay in close touch with the prison chaplains who distribute the paper, making prompt changes if significant numbers of the newspaper are being destroyed rather than distributed.

### **Staff at risk**

Working with prisoners comes with some risk. A decade ago, a paroled prisoner visited a Prison Fellowship field office and, for reasons unclear, severely assaulted the secretary working there alone. As a result, Prison Fellowship management made significant changes in staffing and building facilities, to provide security for its employees. Also, anyone entering a prison on behalf of Prison Fellowship receives more than 20 hours of training before they can begin. Volunteers and outside correspondents are told never to give their home address to a prisoner; they must use a P.O. Box or church address. While there is potential danger from disaffected readers, however, the work goes on.

### **The mission**

Why does Prison Fellowship—despite special rules, risk, and substantial costs—continue to produce and distribute *Inside Journal* for prisoners? Christ commanded us to "remember those in prison" and "to shine a light into darkness." We should do no less. ❖