

# Equal Justice Initiative

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/slavery-by-another-name-documentary-aired-on-pbs/>

## Policy Issue Resources

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02.13.12

Last year, Alabama officials banned prisoners from reading the Pulitzer prize-winning history, *Slavery by Another Name*, at Kilby Correctional Institute in Mt. Meigs, Alabama. Alabama prison officials have admitted that they banned the book based on its content, which examines racial history in the South following Reconstruction until World War II. The acclaimed book has been made into a new PBS documentary that will air tonight on stations across the country.

The book *Slavery by Another Name* by award-winning journalist Douglas Blackmon documents how African Americans in Alabama and throughout the South were re-enslaved in the years following the Civil War, due in part to laws specifically written to facilitate the arbitrary arrest of African Americans. Unable to pay the resulting fines, in addition to the costs for their own arrests, they were sold as forced labor to mines, railroads, farms, and quarries. It won the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction in 2009.

In 2010, Kilby prison officials banned the book, saying its content was too provocative. In September 2011, [EJI filed a federal civil rights lawsuit challenging the book banning](#). In their answer to the complaint filed by EJI, prison officials stated that their decision to deny access to the book was made on the basis that the book, its title, its contents and/or its pictures could be used (or misused) by inmates to incite violence or disobedience within the institution.

The era of racial violence, lynching, and convict leasing in the South following Reconstruction is a deeply disturbing part of our country's racial history that is important and must be understood if we are to make progress overcoming the legacy of slavery and racial subordination, said Director Bryan Stevenson, who filed the civil rights suit. We can't cope with the racial history of this country by banning books or preventing people from reading about it even incarcerated people, who retain basic rights and protections that were violated in this case.

The [PBS documentary](#) by the same name was selected for the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, where following the film's screening, the audience gave a nearly 2-minute standing ovation for its director Sam Pollard, whose directing credits include *Eyes on the Prize* and several *American Masters* documentaries for PBS.

The film makes its PBS debut today at 9 p.m., as part of the channel's Black History Month programming.

*Slavery by Another Name* is widely recognized as a reputable account of a deeply disturbing part of our country's history that must be grappled with and understood, states EJI Director Bryan Stevenson, who filed the suit. With PBS preparing to broadcast the documentary version of the book, there is an opportunity for renewed scrutiny of any attempts to censor informed thinking by Alabama prisoners about race and discrimination, a population disproportionately comprised of people of color.

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