

**You Gotta Fight For Your Right (To Read): The Role of Librarians in Prison Book Bans**

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## **You Gotta Fight For Your Right (To Read): The Role of Librarians in Prison Book Bans**

An often-overlooked library is one that exists where many individuals expect themselves to never go: the prison library. Typically ignored by the general public, prison libraries are not immune to the challenges facing other libraries in the nation, namely book banning. Prisons in all 50 states and the District of Columbia ban books, and about half keep lists of what they have banned (Blakinger, 2023). Despite their user base being exorbitantly smaller than other libraries, prison libraries experience the largest amount of book bans (Deutsch, 2022). This is not a new development in the fight for intellectual freedom, with prison book bans being “an intrinsic feature of American incarceration,” originating in some of the “earliest models” of detention centers (Austin, 2023, p. 2). For those incarcerated, accessing books “is a lifeline, a survival mechanism, a way to plan for the future, [and] maintain a sense of self and connection to the outside world” (Austin et al., 2023, p. 19). Access serves as a means for incarcerated individuals to educate themselves during their sentence (Tager, 2019), and provides them with hope that they can return to the outside world (Jenkins, 2023). It provides rehabilitation (Jenkins, 2023; Tager, 2019), which is a goal touted by carceral facilities (Owens-Murphy, 2023), and prevents recidivism (Jenkins, 2023; Tager, 2019). Because prison libraries exist on the fringes of society, the general populace is unaware of the dangers of book banning in these spheres, making the act even more insidious and dehumanizing, and so much harder for librarians to fight. Inmates are frequently denied access to rehabilitating items, often for arbitrary reasons, and are therefore denied the ability to exercise their First Amendment rights.

Carceral facilities typically engage in two types of censorship: content-based and content-neutral. Items are most often banned for containing any of the following themes: nudity, depictions of violence, criminal activity, or anything that may threaten safety or social order

(Austin, 2023; Austin et al., 2023; Birc, 2022; Deutsch, 2022; Tager, 2019), but specific reasons for censorship are often left to the whim of the person doing the censoring (Jenkins, 2023; Tager, 2019). Content-based bans are rooted in racism and xenophobia (Austin, 2023; Austin et al., 2023; Birc, 2022; Chan & Dillon, 2022; Dillon, 2023; Jenkins, 2023), as are the methods of operating carceral facilities (Jenkins, 2023). Prisons may also impose content-neutral censorship, and ban items based on *how* they get to incarcerated individuals. Prisons work with ‘approved’ vendors to provide books, and restrict those provided by friends, family, or donations. Prisons cite safety concerns to justify working with these vendors, stating that books from other sources may be used to smuggle in weapons, drugs, or other contraband (Jenkins, 2023; Tager, 2019), or be used as weapons (Austin et al., 2023). This forces prisoners to purchase items using their already scarce money (Deutsch, 2022; Tager, 2019), allowing the institution to exert more control over items prisoners access (Deutsch, 2022; Dillon, 2023). It should be noted that there is a gross lack of empirical research to support the assumptions that a book’s content leads to rebellion, or that books will be used as weapons or to smuggle contraband (Deutsch, 2022; Jenkins, 2023; Tager, 2019).

Librarians may not be aware of the gravity of this issue, as there can be as little as one librarian consulting for the prison systems of an entire state, if at all (Austin et al., 2023). If a librarian is not overseeing a prison library, prison officials then determine what books are appropriate for incarcerated individuals. The criteria they follow are often vague, arbitrary, and not subject to review by trained professionals (Chan & Dillon, 2022; Dillon, 2023; Tager, 2019). For example, prison librarians have reported that other prison employees have banned items they considered “pornographic” or “violent,” when the librarians would not have classified them that way (Austin et al., 2023, p. 19). This gross oversight and lack of training for decision-makers

infringes on prisoners' First Amendment rights.

Although the Supreme Court has ruled that book banning can occur in some instances in carceral facilities (Deutsch, 2022), prisoners are not automatically stripped of their Constitutional rights upon imprisonment (Tager, 2019). *Turner v. Safley* (1987) found that “prison walls do not form a barrier separating prison inmates from the protections of the Constitution.” Unfortunately, the Court has yet to establish a fundamental right to read for prisoners (Owens-Murphy, 2023), meaning that their rights are being violated with little to no oversight. The American Library Association (2019) has a response for all concerns raised by those who support censorship in prison libraries, namely that prison libraries should be overseen by trained librarians who fully understand the dangers of censorship and can work to combat it. The ALA provides comprehensive guidance for prison librarians and addresses censorship for safety concerns by stating that only items presenting “an actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security should be restricted” (ALA, 2019). If an item poses no safety risk and does not violate any laws, there are no grounds to ban it within a carceral facility.

Librarians must fight these attempts to censor information from this vulnerable population (ALA, 2021), as these individuals often do not have the ability to effectively fight for themselves (Tager, 2019). Incarcerated individuals are often overlooked and mistreated by those who are charged with keeping them safe and maintaining the institutions that house them. Prisons desperately need librarians, as they are compelled to recognize and honor the dignity and worth of these individuals, and fight to dismantle the systemic oppression that is working to take away their rights (ALA, 2021). Prison librarians are in a unique position to effect immense change in a population that is often pushed aside by society, and they can be a positive influence in countless lives by fighting against the injustices of censorship in carceral facilities.

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