

Book Bans: An Exploration of the Intersection Between Prisons, School Libraries, and Public Libraries in Texas

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Abstract

In recent years, the increase in censorship attempts via book challenges and bans has been a large part of public discourse. This has only escalated recently with the shuttering of the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the changing political landscape. The research in this paper is focused on a single state, Texas, but is representative of censorship efforts being documented across the country. Texas was selected due to having one of the highest rates of incarceration in the nation and one of the highest rates of book bans. For a variety of unique reasons, materials are heavily restricted for people who are incarcerated, many of which share the same genres and themes found unsuitable for public schools and libraries. Across all three institutions--prisons, libraries, and schools--banned materials adversely affect people from marginalized communities, especially Black, brown, and LGBTQ+ people. This paper seeks to compare and contrast the book bans inside prisons with the material challenges facing public schools and public libraries within the state of Texas, utilizing research methods of interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. It also explores how book bans in these three institutions affect populations with multiple marginalized identities and what information professionals can do to intervene on behalf of these populations.

Keywords: censorship, book ban, book challenge, book reconsideration, incarceration, public libraries, public schools, Texas

Article Type: Research paper

Introduction

A popular colloquial phrase suggests everything is bigger in Texas. The phrase lightheartedly alludes to the state's expansive geography but holds a more concerning truth. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (2024), "Texas has an incarceration rate of 751 per 100,000 people...meaning that it locks up a higher percentage of its people than any independent democratic country on earth." Blakinger et al. (2022) with The Marshall Project compiled an

ever-evolving list of 9,396 titles that have been banned in Texas prisons. Further, in the 2023-24 school year, Meehan et al. (2024) with Pen America documented 538 book bans in Texas schools, which were among the highest in the country. Finally, in 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) revealed that individuals and groups made 49 attempts to challenge or ban 1,470 titles in Texas public schools and libraries--again, among the highest in the country.

Book banning trends, otherwise considered censorship attempts, are not unique to Texas prisons, schools, or libraries. While research shows book bans are happening around the country, these censorship attempts are particularly relevant for institutions in Texas. In most cases, prisons, schools, and libraries are publicly-funded institutions along the heart of the “Bible Belt,” the southernmost region of the United States characterized by its conservative, Protestant-Christian roots. With blurred lines between politics and religion, many stakeholders—political and religious groups, parents, boards, administrations—are the same challengers and decision makers across all three institutions, especially between schools and public libraries (American Library Association, 2023a, p. 8).

Through a combination of literature review, questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis, the research presented in this paper seeks to examine and summarize trends in book banning and censorship attempts across prisons, schools, and libraries in Texas. Our research will summarize and recommend how information professionals, particularly librarians, can provide support to people who are incarcerated through programming and advocating against book bans for people behind bars. We will discuss the implications of book bans across Texas institutions and how these censorship attempts impact individual liberties, particularly for historically marginalized individuals and communities. Ultimately, our research will shed light on how book bans and censorship attempts uphold cultural hegemony and existing power structures at the expense of people from marginalized communities.

Literature Review

Our research begins with an overview of existing literature as we begin to unpack the landscape and impact of reading and book bans in schools, libraries, and carceral facilities in Texas and beyond. Perhaps the most often heard about aspect of censorship in Texas today is the case of book bans within public schools. The

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Texas has tracked the number of book challenges and bans since 1996, though reports are only publicly available from 2002-2019 (American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, 2022). During this time frame, book bans were on the decline, with 16 books banned during the 2005-2006 school year and only 6 banned in the 2018-2019 school year (American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, 2006; American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, 2019). These numbers pale in comparison to the recent findings of PEN America. In a recent study of the landscape of censorship via book bans, experts found 801 books banned across 22 Texas school districts in the 2021-2022 school year and 635 banned books across 12 districts in the 2022-2023 school year (Meehan, et al, 2023). With this drastic change between 2019 and 2023, one might wonder what is driving this increased wave of censorship.

This escalation in school book bans is not occurring in a vacuum; it is being actively reinforced through new legislation. One of the most impactful recent laws is HB 900, The READER Act (Restricting Adult and Explicit Designated Education Resources), which went into effect September 1, 2023. This presents yet another obstacle for Texas public schools, as the law requires all vendors who sell materials, or who have previously sold materials with sexual content of any kind to school districts, to assign ratings to the materials that have been purchased. The two ratings a book can receive are (1) sexually explicit or (2) sexually relevant (Texas Library Association, 2023). In order for a book to be rated sexually relevant, the content must align with required curriculum set forth by the district, and the book can be accessed only with guardian approval. Anything deemed sexually explicit is recalled or put on a no purchase list. If the vendor fails to rate a book, or incorrectly rates a book after a 60-day period, the book is added to the no purchase list. Though HB 900 is currently in effect, several organizations have banded together to file a lawsuit against HB 900 stating that it is in violation of both the 1st and 14th Amendments (Texas Library Association, 2023a). On

November 29, 2023, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments on whether “the state can continue to implement the requirements of HB 900” while the underlying lawsuit on the constitutionality of the law goes through the court system (Texas Library Association, 2023b). As the Fifth Circuit has not yet ruled on the issue, the outcome of the oral arguments remains to be seen. Even so, HB 900 has served as the backbone for another bill aimed at keeping “sexually explicit” content off the shelves of Texas public schools. On March 19, 2025, the Texas Senate passed Senate Bill 13, which “would require that school boards, rather than librarians, have the final say over which new books or materials can be put in school libraries” (Acharya, 2025). SB 13, supported by all 20 Republican senators from Texas, aims to create local school library advisory councils, strengthen parental rights over public school library catalogs over materials that could potentially be accessed by their school-age children, and would even entitle parents access to all written records concerning their child, including but not limited to, “records relating to school library materials the child obtains from a school library” (Texas Legislature, 2025).

Since 2011, PEN America, the Texas Civil Rights Project, and a social justice project called “Banned Books Behind Bars,” alongside others, have researched and reported the common, harmful, and often arbitrary practice of literary censorship implemented by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice on its correctional facilities and its impact on the people who are incarcerated there. According to an article penned by Katie Owens-Murphy from the University of North Alabama in 2023, “the U.S. Department of Justice grants wardens complete jurisdiction over whether a publication is detrimental to the security, discipline, or good order of the institution or if it might facilitate criminal activity” (Owens-Murphy, 2023, p. 11). Prison faculty may restrict reading materials based on any reasoning they see fit, despite the fact their decision-making could infringe on the rights of intellectual freedom, accessibility, and

education of the vulnerable population in their care. Censorship on reading materials in correctional facilities can be implemented from an individual, institutional, and/or statewide ban; Texas currently has a list of over 10,000 books that are prohibited based on their content or for capricious reasons (Birch, 2022).

One study highlights the impact of libraries and reading in prisons, which gives people who are incarcerated a means for productively using and passing time; researchers found “...that prison libraries and reading in prison provided a means of a cognitive escape from a harsh reality, a capacity to find a community of like-minded people within prison and to maintain a pathway back to life and loved-ones ‘outside the fence’” (Garner, 2020, p. 1047). Another study by Kaimei Han (2023) adds that the role of prison libraries are essential in “providing access to educational opportunities, promoting mental health, building family connections, and developing personal skills to adapt to society” (pp. 108-110). Research shows a myriad of benefits to access to books in prisons; when books are banned or removed from carceral facilities, the consequences to personal development and wellbeing can be devastating.

Researchers, libraries, and nonprofit professionals emphasize the importance of information professionals advocating against book bans. Where it concerns direct programming opportunities for people who are incarcerated, Jeanie Austin (2022) summarizes initiatives including, but not limited to, “book cart services, literacy and job-searching programs, programs related to employment, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy, and outreach to sites where people recently released from prison are required to live or to attend programs or meetings” (p. 103).

The New York Public Library (NYPL) has created a system for providing reference support to people who are incarcerated through postal mail through their Correctional Services Program. In addition to other services, such as literacy services for system-impacted teens, NYPL’s

reference services extend far beyond New York prisons and into the rest of the country (Drabinski and Rabina, 2015). Additionally, the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) provides a strong blueprint for information professionals to consider as they seek to provide services for people who are incarcerated. Programming includes weekly book service visits to San Francisco County Jails, access to e-media (including books and music), reference support through mail, and reentry support (SFPL, 2024).

Andy Chan, who has been with Books to Prisoners since 1994 (a nonprofit who mails books to people who are incarcerated), emphasizes the merit behind information professionals engaging with people who are incarcerated and partnering with organizations doing similar work:

We send [books] in response to individuals writing to us, and part of that is creating or maintaining a connection to the outside, to people who care, who recognize some degree of humanity in people who are—basically once they're in a system—treated as machines, as problems to be managed... What we're doing is humanizing the person, and that relationship of showing that we care too... we know [this] has an impact, because people tell us that it's had an impact... where previously they felt rejected, and you know, more unmoored from the rest of society (personal communication, October 31, 2023).

In 2024, as part of the *Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People Initiative* through the San Francisco Public Library, the ALA issued its first revision of the *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained* since 1992. With updates that intentionally consider the information needs of vulnerable populations facing incarceration, including LGBTQ+ individuals, people who are undocumented, youth, and even the particular needs of those who are facing reincarceration, “the new standards will heed the current phenomenon of

mass incarceration, the inequitable incarceration rates of BIPOC individuals, and the rising rates of incarceration of women (especially women of color)” (American Library Association, 2024). The standards have the potential to completely overhaul how information professionals can better support people who are incarcerated, especially those experiencing book bans. While its future remains uncertain, another proposed avenue for addressing access issues is the Prison Libraries Act. Proposed by U.S. Representatives Emanuel Cleaver, II (D-MO), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), and Shontel Brown (D-OH) in April 2023, this bill would significantly improve the issue of literary accessibility in carceral facilities across the continental United States. The Prison Libraries Act was proposed with the hopes that it would “...expand library resources in U.S. state and territory correctional facilities to advance reintegration efforts, reduce recidivism, and increase educational opportunities for incarcerated citizens” (Cleaver House, 2023). With a proposed \$60,000,000 to be distributed over six years, state and U.S. territory governments could apply for a grant to build capacity and improve library services, “including education and job training, digital literacy, career readiness programming, and computer and internet access,” and more (U.S. Congress, 2023). However, despite its potential, the Prison Libraries Act has not yet come to fruition and remains under consideration in the House Committee on the Judiciary. Despite the bill’s potential to transform access to information in carceral settings, it has seen no movement since its introduction in 2023. The recent death of co-sponsor Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, who was an influential voice for justice and equity, raises new questions about whether the bill will gain the support needed to advance.

As the literature and legislative landscape show, censorship in Texas operates through a combination of legal policy, institutional discretion, and cultural pressure—each of which disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Our research builds on this foundation to explore how these dynamics play out across schools, libraries, and prisons, and

what information professionals can do in response.

Research Methods

For this paper, researchers utilized three different methods to collect data: a questionnaire, interviews, and document analysis.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire sought to better understand the level of familiarity information professionals have with material challenges and bans in public libraries, public schools, and prisons—both in general and specifically within the state of Texas. The questionnaire also collected information on interventions currently being implemented by information professionals and ideas for combating material challenges. We chose to survey librarians, LIS professionals, and MLIS students (n=27) who were geographically dispersed to understand two things: one being how aware people outside of Texas were of the widespread impact of material challenges within the state, and the second, to understand the experiences of material challenges in their location as the impacts of censorship are not exclusive to one state. The questionnaire had ten required questions, some of which had an optional follow-up question. The questions were a combination of multiple choice, linear scale, and open:

1. Title and Profession
2. Type of institution or organization in which you work:
 - a. Public library
 - b. Academic library
 - c. School or school library (Public, Private, Charter, etc)
 - d. Prison library
 - e. Student
 - f. Other
3. From 1-5, how familiar are you with the socio-political landscape of book banning in public libraries around the United States?

4. From 1-5, How familiar are you with the socio-political landscape of book banning in schools and school libraries around the United States?
5. From 1-5, How familiar are you with the socio-political landscape of book banning in prisons around the United States?
6. Has your library, school, institution, or organization experienced book banning or book challenges?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Do not know
7. Please rate your level of agreement, neutrality, or disagreement with the following statement: Book bans and challenges disproportionately impact people from marginalized communities.
8. Please rate your level of agreement, neutrality, or disagreement with the following statement: Information professionals should act on behalf of people who are incarcerated who face book bans and challenges behind bars.
9. Does your library, school, institution, or organization have an existing program (or a program in progress) in support of people who are incarcerated?
10. From your perspective, what actions can information professionals take on behalf of people who are both incarcerated and facing book bans, challenges, and censorship attempts? If none, please write: "None."

As the questionnaire was performed while still developing the scope of research, a majority of the questions and responses were not relevant to the discussion herein. The exception to this was the optional "Explain your response" follow-up to question 6 which is cited in the discussion section below.

Interviews

Researchers conducted five interviews, talking with two people involved with Books to Prisoners (a nonprofit organization that mails books to people who are incarcerated), one public

librarian in Texas, one former prison librarian and current public librarian, and one former public school administrator in Texas. These individuals were selected due to their personal knowledge and expertise with schools, libraries, and prisons. Researchers paid particular attention to interviewing people with experience in the state of Texas as much as possible. This provided insight into the Texas landscape, as this is the primary focus of the paper. Each interviewer tailored their questions in order to personalize the interview process and collect the most relevant information. Approximately nine questions were asked during the interview process:

1. What is your experience with challenged materials/book bans?
 - a. Can you speak to the landscape of book bans in Texas prisons, schools, or libraries?
2. How are book bans, book challenges, and/or censorship attempts addressed?
3. Did you observe any repercussions after materials were challenged or banned?
4. What populations do you observe as being most affected by book bans?
 - a. How did the affected populations react to materials being challenged or banned?
5. Did you observe specific themes/authors/titles being challenged?
6. Do you think that the number of challenged materials is increasing?
 - a. Why or why not?
7. How do these book bans impact people with intersecting marginalized identities?
8. Should information professionals be intervening on book bans/challenges?
 - a. If not, why?
 - b. If yes, why? How?

If Question #8 is answered “yes,” then to be followed up with...

9. From your perspective, what actions can information professionals take on behalf of people who are impacted by book bans?

By utilizing interviews as a primary research method our team was able to gain secondhand accounts of the effect book banning and censorship have on groups of marginalized individuals within public libraries, schools, and carceral facilities.

Document Analysis

The third research method used was document analysis. Researchers analyzed over 60 documents, including case studies, policies, censorship reports, and more. This allowed for the collection of data on the specific books challenged across prisons, public schools and public libraries, the reasons given for the actions, general themes disallowed in certain institutions, the number of districts implementing bans, and many more crucial details. Document analysis was a continuous and iterative process in the research process, as the nature of book bans is an ever-evolving and continually worsening issue in our nation.

Findings

Questionnaire. When asked if they had ideas for how and if information professionals can intervene on behalf of people who are incarcerated, our research team’s questionnaire respondents had a variety of suggestions: “build community partnerships,” “increase awareness of the realities of prison libraries,” “create and maintain authentic relationships with prisons and people who are incarcerated rather than adopting an adversarial role,” “support legislation fighting against censorship,” “donate weeded materials to prison libraries,” and “raise awareness through social media.”

Interviews. As evidenced by extreme and arbitrary book bans and censorship attempts, carceral systems are perhaps the most explicit example of power imbalances and how books are utilized as a tool of oppression. In an interview, Michelle Dillon (personal communication, October 30, 2023), a long-time volunteer and board member with Books to Prisoners, says:

Prison is already a place that is obviously about control... it's isolating by design, so when you take away that other form of access [books]...you are damaging their sense of self, and especially when we're talking about books that are of culturally grounded interest, you're severing that connection to information about their heritage, about their pasts, about their futures.

Public Librarian in Bulverde, Texas, Montana Rindahl (personal communication, November 2023) says it is not uncommon to have unhappy patrons.

They just yell at you... I had a person chew me out this summer and essentially call me a pedophile. And I was like, "thank you so much for your feedback. We're here for you." I had a different dad tell me that I didn't know shit, he's seen that shit before and if I think that this is appropriate for children maybe I shouldn't work here, and he wants to talk to my manager... I was like, "well she's not here and when she's gone, I'm the manager. So how can I continue to help you?"

Former Texas educator and administrator Laura Burns has noticed differences in Texas curriculum and textbooks compared to those her students use in Missouri where she currently teaches. "So the textbooks, the items, the words, the way things are laid out in the textbooks for the kids is completely different than other parts of the country... Things are taken out" (L. Burns, personal communication, November 2, 2023).

Each testimony affirmed our original findings, censorship has an adverse effect on individuals, especially those in marginalized communities.

Document Analysis. To deepen our understanding of the current landscape of censorship in Texas, we conducted an extensive document analysis focusing on public schools, public libraries, and carceral institutions. This

method allowed us to examine primary sources—including policy documents, banned book lists, legal filings, public meeting transcripts, and more—in order to trace how censorship is being enacted, justified, and resisted across different contexts. Our analysis reveals that book bans are rarely isolated incidents. Rather, they are part of a broader system of control—often politically motivated, inconsistently applied, and disproportionately harmful to historically marginalized communities. What follows is a closer look at how these patterns play out across each institutional setting.

According to data compiled by PEN America over 500 books were banned from public schools in Texas over the last academic year (Meehan, et al., 2023). In response to these bans, teachers report feeling pressured to alter their curriculum, often at the expense of student learning and intellectual exploration. Many express fear not only for their students, but for their own job security. "Ten current or recently retired Texas school librarians who spoke to a reporter described growing fears that could be attacked by parents on social media or threatened with criminal charges" (Hixenbaugh, 2022). The challenges and subsequent policy changes are also confusing. Texas educator Kathleen Harrison was quoted by the New York Times asking, "OK, you ban a book — does that ban the topic? At what point do I practice subversion?" (Powell, 2021).

According to information professionals Emily Drabinski and Debbie Rabina (2015), "incarcerated people face significant information poverty, both because of limited access to information resources and because incarceration itself produces information needs that cannot be easily met" (p. 42-48). In the past few years alone, the COVID-19 pandemic increased prison censorship as more books were removed from prison shelves for safety and hygiene reasons, which were then never replaced. In Texas prisons, reports show "1,092 books banned statewide in 2020 and 1,603 banned in 2021, increasing the number of rejected books by over

50 percent” (Marquis and Luna, 2023). These removals reflect not only a loss of reading materials, but a deeper erosion of intellectual freedom for people behind bars.

Document analysis found that only a small amount of publicly available information exists on the state of book challenges and bans within public libraries in Texas, despite the American Library Association reporting that 54% of challenges in 2023 and 48% of challenges in 2024 occurred in a public library nationwide (American Library Association, 2023a; American Library Association, 2023b). However, evidence of censorship attempts at public libraries does exist. With the exception of a case in Hood County, Texas, which occurred in 2015, the majority of the evidence found on public libraries has occurred in the last three years. In June of 2015, almost one month after a patron found two books in the collection they deemed not appropriate for children, Hood County Library received 52 requests for reconsideration for the two titles, most of which asked for their complete removal (Peters, 2017). The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) wrote a letter to the County Commissioners Court expressing approval of the library’s decision to retain the books despite complaints that the books promoted “perversion” and the “gay lifestyle,” while also expressing concern over some requests to move those books from the children’s area to the adult area of the library (NCAC, 2015). Despite the lack of publicly accessible evidence of book bans in Texas between 2015 and 2023, the events that occurred in Hood County are not unlike what we see today. Further, requests to relocate books from the children’s section to the adult section of the library are not exclusive to Hood County.

According to recordings from the Commissioner’s Court of Midland County Texas, attempts to censor materials in west Texas remain an ongoing challenge. The issue first arose at a meeting of the Midland County Commissioners Court in February 2023, when Commissioner Dianne Anderson brought up concerns with the content of books donated to

the library. Anderson expressed concern over the process in place to determine whether material belongs in the collection and recommended the library utilize a list generated by state representative Matt Krause as a reference for keeping or discarding donations (“Commissioner’s Court,” 2023a). In August 2023, Commissioner Anderson once again brought forth the issue, suggesting a new library policy which would require books deemed “harmful to children” to be moved out of the children and teen section and into the adult section; Commissioner Anderson referenced H.B. 900 as evidence for why the materials should be moved. The motion to accept this updated library policy passed (“Commissioner’s Court,” 2023b). While the motion passed, it is unclear who will determine if a book is to be deemed “harmful to children.” A few weeks following this motion Anderson and a group of volunteers went through the library collection, pulling 29 titles off the shelves because they did not believe the library director would comply with the new policy (CBS 7 News 2023; “Commissioner’s Court,” 2023c). The Commissioners meeting on September 11 discussed the library visit on August 30 in detail, yet again, the meeting did not yield a clear consensus on how to enact the policy in the future. The issue was tabled for an entire year until October 15th, 2024, when Commissioner Anderson brought forth another motion regarding the library. This time, the motion was for a policy that will require the library director to put a genre system in place that marks books as “questionable” or “explicit” and then restricting access to patrons over the age of 18. The motion was approved and policy put into place (“Commissioner’s Court,” 2024). While it remains to be seen how books are deemed “explicit” or “questionable,” it is clear that the fight over censorship continues.

In one district in Texas, the discussion on book removal from the public library has advanced all the way to the courts. Challenging book removals in court is significant, as the results of the lawsuit can be used to set a legal precedent either in favor of removals or against. In April

2022, seven members of the Llano County Library filed a complaint against the county and numerous public officials in the United States District Court for the Western District of Texas. According to the complaint filing, the county's effort to remove books from shelves began around summer 2021. The defendants in the suit claimed they removed books due to being "obscene" or "pornographic," but those who filed the complaint are not so sure this is true, citing books containing nudity or depictions of sex that remained on the shelves as evidence of defendants only removing materials they personally found objectionable (BraunHagey & Borden, 2022). Plaintiffs also took umbrage at the decision by the Llano County Library System Director to indefinitely suspend the ebook service Overdrive, which had provided card holders with access to more than 17,000 titles. After this suspension, the Commissioners Court voted to create a new library advisory board and agreed to hold those meetings privately to avoid public commentary (Zalusky, 2023, p. 8-9). Plaintiffs argued these decisions infringe on their first amendment rights (BraunHagey & Borden, 2022). In a filing on March 30th, 2023, the court granted the plaintiffs a preliminary injunction which required all the books be returned to the shelves and the catalog updated to allow them to be checked out while the lawsuit continues. The court order also enjoined the defendants from removing any other book from the collection until the case has been resolved, stating "The Court finds it substantially likely that the removals do not further any substantial governmental interest—much less any compelling one" (Pitman, 2023). The defendants appealed this injunction to the higher court, and on June 6th, 2024 the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit issued a decision on the appeal, affirming the District Court's order with slight modifications to the injunction, which would allow some of the books to be kept off the shelf while litigation continues. The defendants once again appealed and asked the Court for a rehearing, which they were granted (McGill, 2024). On September 10th, 2024 the ACLU and the ACLU of Texas filed an amicus brief asking the Court of Appeals to uphold the District Court's decision

(American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). The case remains stayed in the District Court and it is unclear whether this will be temporary or permanent (Court Listener, 2022).

Trends in material challenges are consistent and interconnected in both public libraries and public schools across Texas. In 2021, Texas state representative Matt Krause created a list of 850 books he wanted removed from any public school in the state (Ellis, 2021). This list was referenced in a discussion involving the Midland County Library system as proof of harmful books to be removed from their library ("Commissioner's Court," 2023a).

Similar to trends in public libraries, book challenges have been on the rise in Texas public schools over the last few years.

The protocol for handling challenged materials varies from one district to another, and challenged books are typically supposed to remain available to students until a thorough review process has completed and a final decision to retain or remove the book has been made. However, school librarians are reporting that administrators are skipping steps in the review process and removing materials with little reflection. The Carroll Independent School District was found to have removed a book without formal review after an email from a parent. "...an administrator shared the email with her and another librarian, and in order to avoid conflict, they agreed to remove the book from the high school shelves" (Hixenbaugh, 2022b). Librarians and educators are being accused of indoctrinating and grooming students when providing materials that fall under these categories.

A Texas school district is facing a civil rights complaint that has the potential to set a new legal precedent when it comes to book bans. The Granbury Independent School District is currently under investigation by the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights after the ACLU of Texas filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education (Taylor,

2023). Superintendent Jeremy Glenn asked librarians to “remove books with LGBTQ+ themes from the shelves,” which resulted in the removal of over 100 books (Taylor, 2023a). Referring to documented homophobic and transphobic comments by Superintendent Glenn, the ACLU of Texas states, “anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment was the reason the books at issue were removed from the district library” (Taylor, 2023b). The ACLU claims this is a violation of Title IX. Having clearly documented bias towards LGBTQ+ people allows the ACLU to file the complaint as illegal discrimination, which sets this complaint apart from others. Should the investigation lead to a lawsuit, it has the ability to set a crucial legal precedent for book removals across the country.

Trends in censorship attempts in schools and public libraries are only the tip of the iceberg. These trends in censorship, including the potential legal precedents in motion, are amplified when it comes to carceral facilities.

Even as book bans and challenges in public schools and public libraries have steadily increased since 2021, the most censorship in the United States occurs in prisons (Jensen, 2023). Across the nation and in the state of Texas, the majority of public knowledge and discourse on the topic of book bans is focused on public schools and libraries, while the strictest restrictions on an underserved and often invisible population remain ‘out of sight and out of mind.’ Further, as an overarching rule, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) denies access to materials that are perceived as potential security threats (Watson, et al., 2011).

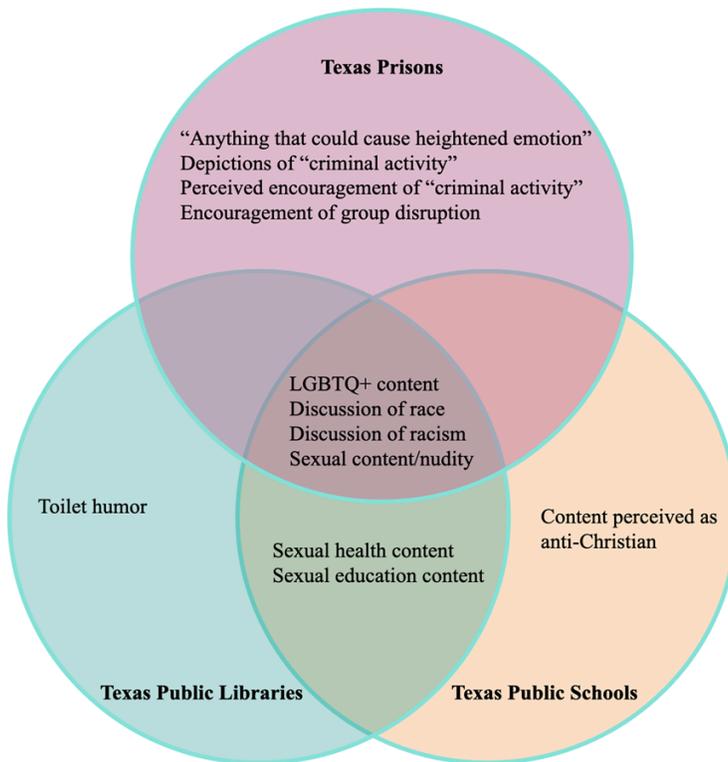
Content-based bans are bans that are implemented based on subject matter and themes depicted in the literature. These restrictions are not solely limited to written text but also apply to photographs, images, drawings, and maps, especially when they are maps of Texas. A 2019 PEN America report discusses additional prohibited items, such as *National Geographic* and anatomy medical reference books as well as “... Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic*

Verses, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and books on the Civil Rights Movement” (pg. 4). The official TDCJ Board Policy outlines all prohibited content, of which the inclusion would result in immediate denial of the book in question. Under this policy, books can be denied for containing content related to sexual content, nudity, or obscenity; racial animus; and depictions of violence, criminal activity, or escape—or language perceived to encourage any of those actions (Cauley, 2020, p. 5). These restriction policies imply the materials could elicit high emotion or motivation to ‘cause trouble,’ including, but not limited to, mentions of strikes, riots, criminal schemes/illegal activity, police brutality, violence in prisons, and so forth (TDCJ, 2023b). As such, individuals who are in custody of the Texas carceral system won’t even get a chance to read a book that they helped authored, as the title TEXAS LETTERS, volumes 1 and 2, “an ongoing anthology of letters written by inmates detailing their experiences with solitary confinement” was immediately and unsurprisingly added to the over 10,000 materials on the TDCJ Banned Books list (Garcia-Galindo, 2024).

Discussion

Trends and Connections between Public Libraries, Schools, and Prisons. Based on our research, across schools, libraries, and prisons in Texas, the most commonly banned and censored themes are those that threaten existing power—themes relating to Black and brown history, the LGBTQ+ community, sexuality, and more, as depicted in Figure 1. We also found that many other challenged themes were categorized as “anti-Christian” or atheist in nature (Torrisi and Brimacombe, 2010, p. 94-101). Book topics that center people of color, slavery, civil rights, transgender history, and sexuality inherently challenge the foundations upon which this country was founded—the very same foundations that uphold white supremacy (Robinson, 2018). Further, one survey respondent from our research wrote, “when banning content, the wealthy/those in power always have a way of opting out” in response to

Fig. 1 Themes Found in Banned Materials



their strong agreement with the statement “Book bans and challenges disproportionately impact people from marginalized communities.” As book bans continue to negatively impact people who have not been afforded power and privilege, those with power can find other sources that allow them the agency to read anything, leaving others without access.

In another example of how book bans demonstrate a stark disparity in power, Austin, et al., (2020) say, “Given the state’s near-complete control to determine which information those in prison are able to access, books become an exclusive tool available to prison authorities, granting power to shape behavior in whatever ways preferred by the system” (p. 169-185). Across Texas institutions, the people who have the power to ban books have every incentive to uphold their own power—to be re-elected, to control, to preach—at the expense of people at the margins. Austin, et al. (2020) demonstrate how existing power structures block an individual’s right to information:

It is not just access to any book that matters. Instead, it is access to books or information that are desired that provides a feeling of connection between people who are incarcerated and across the carceral institution’s walls. The extensive, and often arbitrary, reasons utilized to justify censorship efforts on the part of carceral facilities reflect their investment in maintaining systems of social privilege and oppression that have shaped, and been shaped by, terrains of information access (p. 171).

Censorship is a method of reinforcing systems of oppression and protecting dominant ideologies from being challenged by those with different—often perceived as ‘dangerous’—perspectives. Controlling content through erasing identities, suppressing history, and only allowing access to what is deemed palatable ensures that power remains concentrated in the hands of those who benefit from silence and sameness.

How Trends Affect Marginalized

Communities. Book bans in public schools are especially harmful for young readers who rely on literature not only for learning but for self-understanding. For students with intersecting marginalized identities—such as queer youth of color—the impact of censorship is especially severe. The removal of books that reflect their lives reinforces a message of exclusion, suggesting that their identities are inappropriate, controversial, or unworthy of recognition. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) famously articulated, books serve as “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors”—they allow readers to see themselves, learn about others, and imagine new possibilities. When books representing marginalized identities are removed, those mirrors disappear. This leaves students with fewer opportunities to feel affirmed, understood, or visible within their own educational spaces.

The impact of these bans is not only symbolic but deeply psychological. Emerging research suggests that Black children and teens experience measurable harm to their mental health and sense of belonging when books that affirm their identities are censored or erased from classroom and library spaces (Pickering, 2023). These harms are compounded for youth at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities—such as Black LGBTQ+ students—who are already at greater risk of isolation, discrimination, and reduced access to culturally relevant materials.

Books featuring people of color and the LGBTQ+ community are in the most jeopardy of being removed. Students who identify as a part of these communities experience feelings of isolation when these books are removed from library shelves and how meaningful it is to have access to books that represent and celebrate their identities. A student from Katy, TX told NBC News reporter “As I’ve struggled with my own identity as a queer person, it’s been really, really important to me that I have access to these books. . . . You should be able to see yourself reflected on the page” (Hixenbaugh, 2022a). That reflection can be a lifeline—an antidote to shame, confusion, and isolation. When it disappears, so too does a vital tool for self-acceptance and survival.

The Trevor Project's 2024 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health highlights the stakes: 39% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including 46% of transgender and nonbinary youth. Moreover, 90% of LGBTQ+ youth reported that their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics, with 45% of transgender and nonbinary young people considering relocating to another state because of LGBTQ+-related politics and laws (The Trevor Project, 2024). In an increasingly hostile political landscape, the removal of affirming LGBTQ+ narratives from shelves contributes to a culture of erasure that places queer youth at greater risk of isolation and harm.

Furthermore, though it is not harmful in the same way that it is for students with marginalized identities, all children are impacted by the erasure of diversity and the implementation of homogenous narratives. Fellow information professional, Grace Pickering, argues that “children from dominant cultures need to see others represented (windows); this allows them to see they are connected to other people, that they are just one of many ways of being; perhaps they even feel invited in to learn more (sliding doors)” (2023). Without this exposure, students may grow up with limited empathy, cultural understanding, or curiosity about people different from themselves.

This pattern of erasure extends far beyond the classroom. People who are incarcerated—many of whom are Black, brown, queer, or who have multiple intersecting marginalized identities—face even greater restrictions on access to information that reflects their lived experience. As discussed in our document analysis, thousands of titles have been banned in Texas prisons, including books about racial justice, LGBTQ+ identity, and even prison reform. These bans further isolate people who are incarcerated from their communities, their cultures, and their personal development.

When the same themes—race, queerness, resistance, justice—are censored across schools, libraries, and prisons, a troubling pattern emerges. These trends reflect more than discomfort with individual books; they expose a system that seeks to marginalize entire identities and communities. Whether in a school classroom or a prison cell, access to representative literature is a humanizing force. Its removal sends a clear message: some lives, and some stories, are not meant to be seen.

Interventions for Information Professionals. Information professionals are a common thread among schools, libraries, and prisons—all of which have their own librarians, media specialists, and technology support. As individuals and entities who are tasked with safeguarding the right to information, any

challenge to information access should be met with swift action by information professionals, and information professionals can play a vital role in disrupting book bans and censorship attempts. Of note, carceral facilities, while similar in many ways, differ in restrictions, policies, procedures, and leadership; the examples of programs and interventions Austin and other researchers have provided may work for one prison, but not for another. Information professionals can use examples of existing programs to replicate or invent new programs tailored to the incarcerated population in their jurisdiction. Information professionals can look to existing research and practices, such as the aforementioned New York Public Library and San Francisco Public Library, for ideas on how they can expand access to materials for people who are incarcerated in their service areas. Through their education, experience, and positional power, information professionals can help shed light on the injustices people who are incarcerated face and create opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Future Research Questions and Implications.

Finally, our research resulted in a number of potential future research questions and implications. Many schools, libraries, and prisons are connected through public funding and stakeholders, further research is necessary to explore other connections. For example, there may be censorship patterns in the school-to-prison pipeline. Does banning books in elementary school affect carceral outcomes for children? If a child doesn't have access to certain books throughout their K-12 education, only to end up in prison where those same books are not allowed, how might this impact that individual's social, economic, political, and cultural growth? Additionally, our research shows that themes of sexuality are among the most banned across all three Texas institutions. Do banned titles on sexuality have implications on the availability and quality of sex and health education for K-12 students? We believe the negative impact of book bans and censorship attempts, particularly on people who are incarcerated and K-12 students, may stretch

farther than current research suggests. In prisons, where access to books is already limited by the nature of carceral facilities, the consequences of banning books are vast, including stripping away the potential for people who are incarcerated to build connections with themselves, their peers, and their communities. Our research has demonstrated the dangers of banning books, but our research only begins to touch on the harms and consequences of banning books for people who are incarcerated—especially people of color and those who identify with the LGBTQ+ community.

In sum, we were able to answer all of our research questions while opening the door for future research opportunities. Our research not only highlights the thousands of banned book titles and themes across Texas—it underscores and supplements existing research as to how book bans and censorship attempts attack individual liberties, particularly for people at the margins, and reinforces the idea that information professionals play a critical role in ensuring everyone has the right to read. Ultimately, our research sheds light on how censorship attempts exist to maintain an unequal distribution of power.

Conclusion

The answers to our research questions boil down to one core concept: systemic oppression. Our research shows that book bans and censorship attempts are more than the loss of a book or a title from circulation—they strip away an individual's power and agency, severing ties to themselves and their communities. Book bans and censorship attempts uphold existing power structures by chipping away at one's freedom of speech and pursuit of happiness—ideas that are woven into our country's fabric but are often not applicable to people at the margins, especially if you are incarcerated or deemed too young to make decisions for yourself. Further, challenging or restricting materials in public libraries, public schools, and prisons have serious implications, ranging from legal challenges to civil rights investigations. On top of legal repercussions, our

research found there is a social-emotional toll of removing, challenging, and restricting access to books—from people who are incarcerated, to youth, to information professionals. Despite the increase in censorship attacks, information professionals have the positional power to fight book challenges and removals. Books can be a source of refuge, joy, and growth. Book bans challenge more than just titles on the shelf: they challenge our fundamental right to read. Our research has demonstrated the dangers of banning books, but only begins to touch on the harms and consequences of banning books for people who are incarcerated, the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color. We hope this paper can be used as a strong foundation for information professionals looking to get more involved in programming fighting censorship attempts—not just in Texas but across the country.

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