



Prison Book Programs and Content-Neutral Censorship

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As prison censorship on the basis of the content of books commands more public attention, attention should also be given to policies restricting sources of books within prisons, also termed “content-neutral censorship.” Content-neutral censorship limits options for book access by people who are incarcerated, who already have few avenues for access due to suppressed autonomy and lack of disposable income. One of the most impacted categories of book providers has been prison book programs, which share a mission to provide free books to incarcerated individuals. In recent years, public outcry has successfully reversed content-neutral censorship and restored access to prison book programs. This commentary outlines these issues for readers and suggests a stronger call to action to identify and reverse content-neutral censorship in the future to sustain the irreplaceable benefits of prison book programs.

Increasingly, public attention has been drawn to prison censorship triggered by the content of books. Content-based censorship is a bellwether of broader issues. For example, advocates have revealed that mailrooms in carceral facilities disproportionately reject books written by—and written for audiences of—Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Chan and Dillon 2022), an extension of other oppressions in prison systems (Austin et al. 2020). Pushback on content-based censorship is important, but alarms must be raised about a second, equally detrimental form of censorship in prisons and jails: content-neutral censorship (Tager 2019). Content-neutral censorship targets selected book providers. It severely constricts reading materials by prohibiting small publishers and distributors from providing free and/or used books. Prison book programs, which distribute free books, are particularly vulnerable to these prohibitions and have been left without sufficient remedies to restore access.



Prison book programs are independent community groups sharing a mission to provide free reading materials to incarcerated individuals upon request. These programs supplement unreliable or costly book access, such as prison libraries (which may have limited inventory and access) or policies otherwise limiting books received by an incarcerated reader to items purchased directly by the reader and shipped brand-new to the mailroom. Prison book programs, the first of which began operating in 1972, are typically volunteer led and decentralized. As independent groups, prison book programs communicate with networked prison book programs, but operate with autonomous branding, leadership, and jurisdictions. A list on the website for Prison Book Program in Massachusetts (“Books to Prisoners Programs—Prison Book Program” n.d.) indicates operational prison book programs within 32 states and the District of Columbia. Some prison book programs serve small geographic areas while others send books nationally. Some groups focus on specific demographics, such as LGBTQ individuals. By responding directly to request letters, programs can provide tailored books for each person’s background and goals. Prison book programs typically form when a group of community members recognizes, and commits to mitigating through direct action, the precariousness of access to books within carceral facilities.

Access to books may be precarious due to poorly conceived mailroom policies. Prison mailrooms monitor incoming letters, periodicals, and books addressed to incarcerated individuals. Because mailrooms are perceived by facility operators as contraband entry points (Shukla, Peterson, and Kim 2021), strict and frequently altered policies are created. One increasingly common policy prohibits incarcerated individuals from receiving original copies of personal letters and instead substitutes poor quality photocopies (Wang 2022) on the basis of fears about drug-soaked papers. Policies governing books and magazines are often vague, leaving room for bias and individual misinterpretation under the guise of “facility safety.” For example, Georgia Department of Corrections Policy 227.06 indicates that books can be banned if “the material is of a type that depicts, describes, encourages, or has caused . . . disruption of facility security” without any elaboration on those terms (Georgia Department of Corrections 2018).

Concerningly, many facilities have attempted to make policies to limit sources of books, which impacts the ability of prison book programs to provide free books. In 2018, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections banned all book donations. If outcry had not rescinded the policy, people in

prisons would have lost access to thousands of free books each year provided by prison book programs; volunteers from one targeted prison book program noted that they could offer wider variety and more consistent access than small on-site prison libraries and banning prison book programs would have resulted in incalculable losses (Hughes 2018). Also in 2018, the New York State Department of Correctional and Community Services attempted to pilot a new policy which could have restricted sources of books to just five vendors offering a grand total of 77 books for purchase (Baird 2018). Expressing dismay with the policy, representatives of the prison book program Books Through Bars wrote, “Directive 4911A limits incarcerated people to a few dozen books and magazines, purchased at a premium from a handful of favored businesses. . . . Relying on these vendors is another financial burden placed on prisoners, their friends, their loved ones, and their communities” (Books Through Bars 2018). In 2019, the Washington State Department of Corrections tried to ban all used books from entering prisons, again citing a rise in contraband (later proven to be unfounded). This change effectively banned prison book programs in Washington prisons until—once again—public outcry reversed the policy (O’Sullivan 2019). Other recent policy changes have included restriction of procurement of all books to a single vendor, not only severing access to free programs but raising serious questions about the procurement process for selecting that book seller (Tomasek 2022). In all cases, reversals of content-neutral censorship only happened when public pressure mounted.

Prisons should not create undue barriers to book access. Such policies are demonstrably ill-conceived and publicly unpopular given the myriad known benefits of reading for eager and invested readers. If reliable access to books is to be maintained, content-neutral censorship must be treated as seriously as content-based censorship. Like content-based censorship, content-neutral censorship is often rooted in vagaries about security, and a lack of oversight means that draconian and unregulated policies continue to be implemented. The outcome is a paucity of reading materials and increased financial stress on already impoverished incarcerated individuals (Sarai 2022). Prison book programs, which provide irreplaceable access to thousands of free, used books across the country, must be recognized as legitimate and protected sources. Access to free prison book programs specifically needs to be encouraged and cultivated within prisons. Books cannot be treated as dangerous until proven otherwise, and neither can long-standing community groups like prison book programs.



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