



Denormalizing Censorship Inside Carceral Facilities

Author _ Jeanie Austin (jeanie.austin@sfpl.org), Jail and Reentry Services Librarian, San Francisco Public Library, and Guest Editor of this issue.

The control of access to information is an intrinsic feature of American incarceration, established in the earliest models for contemporary juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons. From claims to spiritual salvation to fears of disruption, censorship inside of carceral facilities has been implemented under assumptions of threat to social order—including through white supremacist ideas that the cultural, social, and political traditions and ideas of Black, Indigenous, and people of color must be suppressed. The arbitrary and convoluted nature of censorship inside, as illustrated in the commentaries and article in this issue, are part and parcel of the labyrinthine and opaque functions of carceral facilities.

Censorship within carceral facilities can be active or passive. Materials in this issue detail the active curtailment of access through book bans and content-neutral censorship, as well as censorship practices of Correctional Officers working in mail rooms and of carceral administrators. Beyond this, there is a passive censorship that takes place through limited attention to library services for people who are incarcerated. Lack of staff, books, access to library spaces, or even a physical space for books and information inside facilities is a passive and pervasive form of censorship. To underline this point: prison librarians may be dependent on donations of approved materials to stock their libraries . . . some are hoping for donations of books published within the last twenty years to create more current library collections. This passive lack is heavily compounded as information is born digital and incarcerated people have almost no access to the internet.

As this issue illustrates, access to information and books serves myriad functions: it recognizes people who are

incarcerated for their individual interests and aspirations (within a system that forecloses this recognition), supports the friends and families of people who are incarcerated, provides opportunities of reprieve from the trauma of incarceration and to dream of other futures, and provides opportunities to create multi-dimensional community through the sharing of information and ideas.

Despite dire conditions and the overarching power that carceral institutions have to control information access, recent campaigns highlight that resisting censorship and advocating alongside incarcerated people is an effective strategy for creating change. Marquis' feature article details many ways to raise public awareness and to resist further restrictions. In addition to the methods Marquis outlines, there are attempts to better fund prison libraries and implement increased public transparency and oversight in how materials are banned from entire prison systems. The Prison Libraries Act, introduced by Congressman Emanuel Cleaver II, proposed a new line of federal funding to support library services inside of carceral facilities. More recently, AB 1986 (Bryan) was introduced in California. This legislation is supported by Initiate Justice, an inside-outside political organizing nonprofit that creates informed change by responding to demands from currently incarcerated people and supporting their efforts to change the nature of incarceration. If passed, this first of its kind legislation will create mechanisms for political and public oversight of censorship in all California prisons. These and similar efforts denormalize censorship inside, inviting all of us to take part in the effort to increase information access for incarcerated people.