

## Research Article

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# Systemic Oppression and the Contested Ground of Information Access for Incarcerated People

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**Abstract:** Library and information science (LIS), as a whole, has not prioritized the information access of people inside of jails and prisons as a central tenet of library practice. At the moment, there is growing attention given to states' attempts to curtail book access for people inside of jails and prisons. Groups that provide free books to incarcerated people -- such as the numerous Books to Prisoners programs across the United States -- have been central to the discussions around access to information and resistance to censorship. These groups have drawn particular attention to the ways that Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as LGBTQ people, in prison experience ongoing oppression during incarceration because of limited access to materials relevant to their experiences. By identifying the types of information that are banned or limited, the difficulties people who are incarcerated face in seeking to access information, and the impact that access to information has in the lives of people who are incarcerated, this article explains prison censorship as a form of state-sponsored oppression, which is largely being combated by Books to Prisoners rather than LIS. The article ends by explaining LIS' lack of attention to information access for people who are incarcerated.

**Keywords:** Books to Prisoners, Censorship, Incarcerated people, Information access, Oppression, State Power

## 1 Introduction

There has been growing attention given to states' attempts to curtail book access for people inside of jails and prisons. Groups that provide free books to people in jails and prisons -- such as the numerous Books to Prisoners groups across the United States -- have been central to the discussions around access to information and resistance to censorship. For instance, in 2018, New York's Department of Corrections attempted to limit access to a list of approved vendors, curtailing grassroots and non-profit groups that provide free materials to people who are incarcerated. Following public outcry, the policy was rescinded by the governor.

The debates around New York's policies signaled a larger trend in carceral facilities' roles in limiting the amount and types of information available to people who are incarcerated. In 2018 and 2019, there were major censorship attempts across the United States (notably in Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Washington state, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons). These recent attempts are situated within a longer history of state oppression through acts which limit access to information. Ongoing censorship efforts in Florida, Kansas, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Michigan were the results of well-established mailroom policies. In Kansas, public attention to these policies had resulted in the elimination of banned-book lists and the establishment of new processes that people who are incarcerated can use to appeal censorship decisions, although little has changed for those who are incarcerated (Associated Press, 2019; Smith, 2019).

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Despite ongoing organizing among people who are incarcerated and the work of long-standing community groups, library and information science (LIS) has not heavily grappled with the provision of library services to people who are incarcerated and the need to advocate for incarcerated people's access to books and other information. Rather, people who are incarcerated have been positioned as a special population requiring specialized, often "correctionally"-aimed, services, if they are seen as deserving any services at all (Vogel, 2009; Conrad, 2017).

LIS' lack of attention to information access to people who are incarcerated comes despite the American Library Association (ALA)'s core values of librarianship, which define, inform, and guide professional practice (ALA Council, 2019a) and the ALA's Resolution on Prisoners' Right to Read, which interprets the Library Bill of Rights. The latter "asserts a compelling public interest in the preservation of intellectual freedom" for individuals held in carceral facilities (ALA Council, 2019b). The former is meant to extend to all people. Instead, for the millions of Americans detained in carceral facilities, a number of LIS' key values are under threat, including access (the ready, equal, and equitable access to information materials), democracy<sup>1</sup> (which presupposes an informed citizenry, with all persons able to freely express themselves and receive the expressions of others), diversity (the availability of a full spectrum of resources), and intellectual freedom (the protection of intellectual freedom by resisting all efforts to censor materials).

This article addresses the threat that the carceral system poses to LIS' core values by identifying the types of information that are banned or limited, the difficulties people who are incarcerated face in seeking access to information, and the impact that access to information has on the lives of people who are incarcerated. It adds to existing publications on library services and information access for incarcerated people by including an intentional focus on how Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as LGBTQ people, in prison face ongoing oppressions during incarceration because of limited access to materials relevant to their experiences. Practitioners draw from their own experience communicating with people who are incarcerated about their information needs and desires to reveal that Books to Prisoners groups like those described in this article have been providing accessible and diverse material to those who are incarcerated. These groups are shouldering the burden of providing information and combating censorship within prisons, which should, ostensibly, fall within the professional purview of LIS. The article thus identifies a deficiency within LIS, which the article briefly situates in the history of libraries and the ongoing state control exerted in carceral situations, which limits prison libraries. The article also identifies an opportunity for increased services, ending by offering possible courses of action that librarians, and LIS as a field, might take to support people who are incarcerated and the community-based groups that are involved in the ongoing project of resisting state oppression that occurs through information control within prisons.

## 2 The Face of Incarceration in the United States

As of 2015, close to 2.2 million people are incarcerated in federal, state, and local prisons and jails across the United States (Kaeble and Glaze, 2016). African-American and Latino men comprise a large number of those incarcerated. Nearly 10% of Non-Latino Black men and 3.9% of Latino men have been incarcerated at some point in their lives, compared to only 1.6% of Non-Latino White men (Petit and Sykes, 2017). Increased policing, prosecution, and sentencing also extend to other historically disadvantaged groups, not because these groups commit more crimes but because of a history of bias, abuse, and profiling by law enforcement, paired with high rates of poverty, homelessness, and discrimination at school and work. For example, the incarceration rate of those who self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual was nearly three times higher than that of the US adult population in 2012. Forty percent of incarcerated women are lesbian or bisexual

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<sup>1</sup> "Democracy" is central to how ALA presents its mission and the mission of libraries. It is outside of the scope of this article to discuss the complicated and often racialized implications of the term, but the authors agree that this term should be critically examined especially in relation to its use when discussing library services to people who are incarcerated. Utilizing the idea of democracy in this context elides the disenfranchisement of many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and does not acknowledge that state violence enacted through policing and incarceration is also considered to be a functional aspect of a democratic society. Beyond this disenfranchisement and violence, Ettarh (2018) provides an important critique of how the idea of democracy is deployed within librarianship. Similar critiques can be offered when exploring the function of citizenship and belonging as terms utilized within the field.

(Meyer et al., 2017). Nearly half of all Black transgender people in the U.S. have been incarcerated at some point in their lives. Once incarcerated, LGBTQ people are more likely to be sexually victimized, to experience solitary confinement, and to report current psychological distress.

### 3 Providing Information to Incarcerated People

The social control inherent in the disproportionate policing and incarceration of disabled people, LGBTQ people, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and people who experience extreme poverty continues behind prison walls through the selective limitation of information intended to support these individuals. People who have been incarcerated have described the role of books in changing and saving their lives, providing a means to maintain themselves under terrible conditions, and providing a feeling of community both with others who are incarcerated and with the outside world (Gross, 2018; Schwartz, 2018; Sweeney, 2010). As this article shows, 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.

Despite some librarians' efforts to increase information flows between people who are incarcerated and the larger public (evidenced in the 1970s newsletter *Inside-Outside*) and the creation of international and national-level standards for library services to people who are incarcerated, LIS has not prioritized the information access of people inside of jails and prisons as a central tenet of library practice. In this way, LIS has acted in the interests of the already powerful to maintain existing social hierarchies of power through controlled and diminished information access.

The authors of this article draw from their extensive experience as Books to Prisoners program volunteers (Charenko, Dillon, Lincoln) and as a librarian serving people who are incarcerated (Austin) to bring attention to how carceral facilities maintain social hierarchies through information censorship. Briefly stated, Books to Prisoners programs are loosely networked groups of volunteers who provide free donations of reading materials to people in prison upon request. Such groups have developed organically across the country--often arising from anarchist and abolitionist collectives--and have been in service in some form since 1973. Volunteers who work with these programs are therefore in relatively direct and constant contact with incarcerated readers and are situated to understand both the persistent prison library shortages and the changing landscape of prison censorship. This practitioner-focused reflection on the current state of providing information and materials to people who are incarcerated reviews the logics, circumstances, and power plays that allow for and resist censorship. The discussion of recent attempts to further limit the information access and modes of access that have been available to people who are incarcerated reveals a point of contact at which librarians can begin or increase their own advocacy and direct services alongside people who are incarcerated and people who are familiar with navigating carceral systems.

### 4 Curtailing Diversity through Censorship

One of the chief ways that information access is controlled in prison is through censorship. Broadly speaking, prison censorship manifests in two forms: content-based bans and content-neutral bans. Content-based bans restrict the content of individual publications, often for sexual or violent content, but, as is explained below, content-based censorship often extends to books that deal with racism, injustice, civil rights, and LGBTQ experiences of incarceration (Tager, 2019). Content-neutral bans restrict the outlets which can provide publications, restricting book deliveries to "approved vendors" rather than family or Books to Prisoners groups. Both forms of censorship drastically limit the scope of information that can be accessed by people who are in prison (Tager, 2019). For any given prison system, these restrictions are codified by incoming publication policies that are written and maintained by prison administrators; the policies are therefore reflective of the biases and prejudices built into the foundation of incarceration. An examination of these policies in practice --particularly content-based bans, which are more likely to target the most marginalized

-- informs observers about underlying systems which maintain existing social hierarchies by continuing to marginalize Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as LGBTQ, poor, and disabled people.

All incoming publications policies in prisons contain some combination of prohibitions against sexual content, violent content, and content that could disrupt a prison system or facilitate the escape of a person who is incarcerated. However, individual policies are written with broad language in regard to acceptable and prohibited content. The Arizona Department of Corrections' incoming publication policy prohibits "depictions or descriptions that incite, aid, or abet riots, work stoppages, means of resistance, or any other behaviors that may be detrimental to the safe, secure, and orderly operation of the institution" (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2018). Arkansas prohibits "maps or drawings depicting a geographical region that could reasonably be construed to assist methods of escape or eluding capture, or otherwise be a threat to security" as well as any material "that is likely to be disruptive" or "is inconsistent with rehabilitative goals" (Arkansas Department of Corrections, 2017). In the Pennsylvania state prison system, writings which "create a danger within the context of the correctional facility" are prohibited (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 2018). People in Kentucky's prisons are barred from receiving any book with "obscene language or drawings" or that "contains any information that, if communicated, would create a threat to the security of the institution" (Kentucky Department of Corrections, 2016). In Alaska, publications and other mail can be rejected if they contain "information that, if communicated, would create a risk of mental or physical harm to a person" or otherwise should be "banned for good reason following an individualized determination by the Department" (Alaska Department of Corrections, 2018).

These are impossibly nebulous criteria. Prison authorities manipulate this imprecision to justify bans on any material that they may find personally unacceptable. The gist is that, "[w]ith enough time and ingenuity, prison officials and their lawyers can usually imagine some way in which some aspect of a particular written work might conceivably have some marginal effect on prison order or security" (Lipper, 2018).

Fears of overreach by prison authorities on the basis of ambiguous publications policies are fully justified by historical practice. The justifications for censorship offered by prison officials are, far too often, skewed through the lens of power and control and frequently manifest as censorship of materials pertaining to marginalized identities. Commonly censored categories of books include Black history and fiction; Indigenous and Latinx publications; LGBTQ fiction and self-help; and publications written by and about incarcerated people (Tager, 2019).

As Vaidya Gullapalli (2019), senior legal counsel at The Justice Collaborative, writes,

*Bans of books based on their content (or perceived or assumed content—sometimes deduced from a glimpse at a single page), seems to stem from an awareness that an understanding of history, oppression, and liberation can alter a person. When prison officials target books about slavery, about race and racism, about mass incarceration and its politics, they reveal a fear of what that knowledge can awaken, and a belief that their own institutions are indebted to that knowledge being suppressed.*

Censorship is often targeted at populations for whom English may not be the primary language or for whom solidarity is rooted in ethnic identity. In California prisons, multiple Nahuatl texts and Nahuatl-English dictionaries are banned. Nahuatl is a language spoken by contemporary indigenous Mexican groups whose migration patterns have established large communities in California (Hansen & Tlapoyawa, 2016). To quash access to these books is therefore to sever a link of community connectedness for native speakers who are incarcerated in California prisons; it is a tacit isolation technique implemented by prison authorities. As another example of the impact of censorship on these demographics, in August 2014, the Washington Department of Corrections updated its Unauthorized Mail policy to include wording that indicated that publications could now be rejected for content in multiple languages or any non-English language (Washington Department of Corrections, 2014). Although this revision was eventually overturned, it demonstrates the impunity with which prison officials have always been able to manipulate policies to the detriment of incarcerated individuals, whose identities -- based on demographics of prisoners in the United States -- are likely to differ radically from prison officials.

Prison censorship is also often targeted at LGBTQ populations. For example, the Missouri Department of Corrections rejected *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, a resource guide for transgender, gender expansive and non-binary populations. Edited by MD Laura Erickson-Schroth, a fellow at Columbia University Medical Center, the book covers health, legal issues, and cultural and social questions. The rejection letter flagged pages 377 and 387 as being "sexually explicit." The

objectionable pages, part of a longer chapter on transgender health topics, are from an educational section on safer sex, which stresses the importance of consent as well as methods for contraception and preventing sexually transmitted infections. A formal appeal by a Books to Prisoners' group did not change the ruling and *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* remains off limits to those incarcerated in Missouri, as well as several other states (Missouri Department of Corrections personal correspondence with LGBT Books to Prisoners, 2016). Although it's clear that these materials do not in any way constitute pornographic materials, poorly written publication policies have enabled such an application. Missouri's decision fits into a broader pattern identified by prisoner advocates, who believe that prisons "quash all this support you get from the outside" for LGBTQ populations (Gaines, 2018).

Prison officials may also justify censorship by twisting the catch-all concern about "safety and security" to include the safety of the intended reader. In 2018, the ACLU of Washington, working to help Books to Prisoners programs fight censorship, wrote to express concerns to the Washington Department of Corrections (DOC) over ongoing censorship of *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* in Washington prisons. In this letter, the ACLU referenced a meeting with DOC representatives on this topic, stating that during this meeting the DOC "explained that, if a prisoner is seen with such a book, that prisoner will be 'outed' as nonconforming and could become a target for prison violence. You thus reasoned that the book must be excluded to protect prisoners." The ACLU rebutted that the hypothetical reader would be making a choice to read this book and that it would be a reflection of their self-expression; the excuses about protection made by the DOC were therefore reductive, self-serving, and moot (ACLU of Washington, 2018).

One of the most pernicious patterns of censorship in prisons is the frequency of banned materials that address Black and Indigenous history and political organizing as well as anti-racist texts. Some prison systems track and centralize their book rejections into lists of banned books; such lists offer unparalleled insights into the scope of racially-based censorship. Through the accompanying reasons that may be listed for each censored publication, these lists also exemplify how overbroad language about security, race, and gangs in incoming publications policies is weaponized to exclude publications that could offer empowerment and solidarity to readers.

The Human Rights Defense Center (HRDC) submitted a series of public records requests in 2019 to retrieve banned book lists across the country. This paper dissects lists for three states as particularly outstanding examples of biased censorship. Many other states' censorship lists are troubling, particularly New Hampshire, which maintains a list just two pages in length yet finds room to ban a significant number of books on the lived experience of prisoners (Jensen, 2019).

The first state to be examined is North Carolina, which was banning *The New Jim Crow* -- Michelle Alexander's acclaimed examination of the racial roots of mass incarceration -- in prisons until public outcry reversed the ban in 2018 (Bromwich, 2018). The list of books banned by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety as of September 2019 suggests a pattern of censorship against other books that focus on racial inequality and Black history:

- *Kindred* by Octavia Butler
- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
- *I Am Not Your Negro* by James Baldwin
- *Black Robes, White Justice* by Bruce Wright (about racial disparities in sentencing)
- *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man In America* by Nathan McCall
- *There Goes the Neighborhood* by Richard Taub and William Wilson (about racial biases in the housing market)
- *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* by Nancy Isenberg
- *Can't Stop Won't Stop* by Jeff Chang (an acclaimed history of hip hop)

Next is Montana, a state with grossly disproportionate incarceration rates for Black, Latinx, and Native people (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). The most recently available list for the Montana Department of Corrections indicates that the following materials have been banned:

- *Crafts and Skills of the Native Americans* by David R. Montgomery (reason for ban: "Security Threat")
- *Dear White America* by Tim Wise (reason for ban: "Racial")
- *Gangs: An Individual and Group Perspective* by Kimberly Tobin (reason for ban: "Gang related")
- *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* By Maxime Rodinson (reason for ban: "Racial")
- *Politics of Chicano Liberation* by Olga Rodriguez (reason for ban: "Racial")



- Searching for Whitopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America by Rich Benjamin (reason for ban: “Racial”)
- The Concept of Race by Ashley Montagu (a book that challenges the biological concept of race; reason for ban: “Racial”)
- The History of White People by Nell Painter (reason for ban: “Racial”)

Finally, Wisconsin, which has some of the most demonstrably overreaching applications of its alleged gang-related materials (also termed “security threat groups” or “STG”). In 2010, a ban on Dungeons & Dragons by Wisconsin prisons was upheld on the grounds that access to manuals for this cooperative tabletop roleplaying game “could lead to gang behavior and fantasies about escape” (Schwartz, 2010). The banned book list obtained in 2019 reinforces how prison officials have intertwined ideas of solidarity, education, and racial identity to restrict access to a wide range of reading materials:

- Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party by Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin was rejected by a Wisconsin prison with the following note from the anonymous rejecting official: “DOC 309.04 4 (c) 8 b. While it appears to be a historical account and nothing more, I noticed that all the favorable reviews for the book came from former Black Panther members (which to me means this book is probably pro-[Black Panther] and not just ‘historical’ but a glorification of someone we consider an STG).”
- *SF Bay View* (May 2018 issue) was rejected because it “lists Black Panther propaganda”
- Black Panther for Beginners by Herb Boyd was rejected as a “threat to security”
- The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs edited by David Hilliard, allegedly “shows structure/guidelines to be in an STG group.”
- The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Women by Michael Porter, which is described elsewhere as presenting “a fresh perspective on the many facets of sexism experienced by African American women,” is banned in Wisconsin prisons as “a threat to security”
- Faces of Africa by Carol Beckwith, a book of photography, “is inconsistent to rehabilitation”
- Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan Africanism by Stokely Carmichael “advocates violence”
- We Are Our Own Liberators by Jalil Mutagim, a political prisoner, “advocates violence”
- We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party by Mumia Abu-Jamal was rejected as a “STG” violation.

Wisconsin’s list includes a few entries that are labeled as white supremacy/white separatism (including white supremacist David Duke’s work). However, the specificity of the entries censoring Black authors is notable by comparison. Prison officials described a book by Elijah Muhammad as “Anti-Caucasian, Anti-Christianity rhetoric.” There is no parallel language used to justify bans of white supremacist materials; it seems to specifically single out the perceived threat to white, Christian identity. Nothing in the list of books banned in Wisconsin prisons is ever described, for example, as “Anti-Black, Anti-Muslim.”

Even more damning, the Wisconsin prison system maintains a publication review committee, and the list of reviewed materials indicates which initially censored books have been reversed after review. Both *Mein Kampf* and *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* were allowed into prisons after review by this committee, which, by contrast, affirmed that nearly every publication about Black Panthers was declared gang-related material and therefore inadmissible. Such obvious double-standards are, unfortunately, not unique. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice at one point banned *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker while allowing *Mein Kampf* into its facilities (Haag, 2017). It is clear that in prison censorship, “even apparently neutral rationales are often employed in ways that raise the clear specter of racial discrimination” (Tager, 2019).

Recent cases of highly publicized prison censorship have exposed some of these biases. Prisons in New Jersey and North Carolina were banning *The New Jim Crow* until legal and public intervention overturned the bans in 2018 (Bromwich, 2018). In 2011, a prisoner in Alabama sued over censorship of a Pulitzer prize-winning “investigation of the systematically heinous treatment of black prisoners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Robertson, 2011). Arizona barred *Chokehold*, a book about racism in policing, until the ACLU intervened in 2019 (Allyn, 2019). Also in 2019, Howard University School of Law challenged the Michigan Department of Corrections’ ban on Frantz Fanon’s

classic examination of colonialism, *Black Skin, White Masks*. The book was banned by the prison system for allegedly “[advocating] racial supremacy” (quoted in Sekeran 2019).

Censorship is so widespread in prisons because of a general lack of either internal and external oversight in most states. In some states such as North Dakota, the final authority on censorship is a single mailroom official, who adjudicates whether each incoming publication is admissible. A rejection must be appealed by the person who is incarcerated and the deputy warden at each facility is the only reviewer for those appeals, should a book be appealed at all (personal correspondence with Human Rights Defense Center, 2019). In other states, centralized review committees are convened to evaluate potential book bans; while these committees are an improvement over systems such as North Dakota’s, they are often staffed by the same individuals who work in the mailroom, and thus the same biases are replicated (Tager, 2019). In Pennsylvania, publications can be formally reviewed by the Office of Policy, Grants and Legislative Affairs after being rejected by the mailroom, but only after the person who is incarcerated files a formal grievance or the publisher appeals the rejection (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 2018), still leaving the main decision-making power in the hands of mailroom employees. Even more troubling, in some states, prisons do not log the titles of rejected publications; a prison system may claim that notifications of rejections constitute “inmate property” and are thus exempt from public review, or the retrieval of these rejection notifications is so burdensome that charges of hundreds--or thousands--of dollars would be necessary to retrieve copies (personal correspondence with Human Rights Defense Center, 2019). When there are policies in place, those systems also depend on prison officials following proper procedures and submitting rejection notices to recipient and sender of the publication. People in prison occasionally report not receiving books that were sent to them and never receive notice of a content-based rejection per policy (personal correspondence with Book ‘Em, 2019). This obfuscation and lack of accountability effectively allows prison officials to apply censorship with impunity.

## 5 Information Access as Behavioral Control

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. This leverage was epitomized in the 2006 Supreme Court case *Beard v. Banks*, in which Pennsylvania prison authorities argued that it was necessary to prohibit people in solitary confinement from receiving materials as an incentive to “motivate better behavior.” Although the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the prison’s rationale, Justice John Paul Stevens issued a dissent, writing that the decision “comes perilously close to a state-sponsored effort at mind control.”

Where book access is a tool of control, controlling the content becomes imperative. Prison authorities see “the right to have access to one’s history and culture as a threat to... ideas of ‘social order’ -- as if prisons, one of the most dysfunctional and racist institutions in this country, know anything about creating a healthy, multiracial social order” (Onyenacho, 2020).

Illustrative of racialized content bans that control behavior is prison officials’ removal of 200 books from an Illinois prison library in 2018. The books, which were intended to be part of an educational program operating in the prison, included *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, *Up From Slavery*, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and *Race Matters (Freedom to Learn)* (2019). An investigation, spurred by public outcry, revealed that “internal IDOC emails and other documents show that the program was swiftly suspended and the books removed after the race-related themes” were flagged by prison officials (Nickeas, 2019). The community librarian for the educational program whose books were removed directly tied the censorship to the way that the program could “disrupt the standard corrections model” to “free oppressed minds” (Harvey, 2019). Sociologist Brittany Friedman has suggested that prisons disproportionately target books that promote resistance to carceral logic and this is why critical race pedagogy is targeted (Black Agenda Radio, 2019). In other words, “prison authorities like docile, uninformed masses of people because they’re easier to control and dominate” (Jones, 2013) and any information that undermines absolute prison authority must be censored.

Prison librarians, who are constantly faced with the challenge of balancing professional values of serving patrons against constraints imposed by prison systems, have noted the prevalent racial bias in censorship which is aimed at behavioral control. One prison librarian in a midwestern state, speaking under terms of anonymity, wrote that conditions at their prison are such that “any books that might rile up non-white people are censored but books by, say, Glenn Beck or Sean Hannity or Tucker Carlson are NEVER on the censor list. Riling up the white guys in the prison isn’t a problem, apparently” (Personal correspondence with Books to Prisoners Seattle, 2019). Erin Boyington, a prison librarian in Colorado, has echoed this sentiment to describe “how many prisons have a blanket ban on [urban fiction], which are usually by and about people of color. The majority of prison staff are white, and it shows in the books that get banned. I’ve never seen a James Patterson book censored for sex or violence, but urban fiction almost always makes its way to the committee” (Orlofsky, 2019).

People who are incarcerated experience state violence in many forms, including modifying behavior by limiting access to information. This violence is apparent not only when people in prison are unable to access materials that support marginalized identities but also in the ways that prisons may perceive their role in guiding people in prison toward more ‘positive’, or ‘rehabilitative’ materials. There is an “underlying assumption that people in prison aren’t sophisticated readers” and must therefore be carefully guided to more constructive reading patterns (Erin Boyington, quoted in Orlofsky, 2019).

An examination of the reading materials favored by prisons can be as illuminating as the reading materials excluded by prisons inasmuch as these materials showcase the prevailing logic of the concept of rehabilitation. Larry Sullivan (2000) elucidates the historical precedents of prison library service, which now take shape in neoliberal forms:

*Reading was a primary reformative tool for criminals from the beginnings of the penitentiary in the late 18th century, but prison administrators usually gave their charges what they deemed edifying, not what the convicts wished to read. From early in the 19th century to the present, prison administrators have prohibited reading material considered harmful to good, middle-class mores. Prison libraries and reading programs are instruments of cultural hegemony, designed to instill a desire to emulate certain behavior and morality.*

This is an example of the logic of prison bibliotherapy, the use of book selections to intentionally guide desired psychological and behavioral changes in a reader. Those who support book access in service of bibliotherapy often emphasize the benefits to prisons or society over benefits to the ‘prisoner’ as a person. They may describe how access to books reduces “mental, emotional, and physical conflicts in the prison system” (Rossen, 2018), and sometimes these descriptions are more dramatic. A prison library might be evoked as “an oasis of sanity” (The Reading Agency, 2014), and some advocates have claimed that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop in prison, and having a book in them is much better than a weapon” (Hart, 2017). This exaltation is the complement and logical extension of a system that also uses access to books as “punishment, confinement, control, discipline, atavistic vengeance, and even exclusion” (Sullivan, 2000, 56). Within this framework, those readers who cannot agree to the terms set by the institution must be excluded from the power of reading.

For champions of bibliotherapy, controlled prison libraries become hospitals of the mind where ‘deviant’ behavior can be nursed into ‘healthy’ behavior. Historically, the Bible was used as a tool for rehabilitation in prisons, the presumption being to bring people into Christianity and the alleged benefits conferred by its moral framework (Cummins, 1994). Today, the emphasis remains on constructive reading; constructive, of course, in a way that would be beneficial to prison authorities and the society that they represent. Sullivan (1989, 26), for example, references the Boston Prison Discipline Society, which wrote in 1840 that, “Next to labor, reading is the most valuable and extensive means of improvement.” The prison bibliotherapy model presupposes both that a person enters the facility deficient in some vital knowledge, and also that the choices offered by the prison are inarguably correct and corrective.

The paternalism of selective book access is insidious because “the most effective means of encouraging rehabilitation of the inmate is to give him an opportunity to become self-reliant and to make decisions for himself” (Stern, 1972). Yet prison officials continue to censor and prescribe books in narrowly and externally constructed ideals of rehabilitation. In such tightly controlled facilities, where “the prisoners’ right to read is not respected, the [library] collection is a watered down version of prison-approved materials, rather than a collection based on the librarian’s assessment of interest” (which, ideally, will be more sensitive to the true needs of the people who are incarcerated) (Shirley, 2004).



This idea of the purpose of books as cultivating a “civilization of the mind” is repeated in much of the discourse about justifications for prison libraries and other book access. Neoliberal rationales for book access are predicated on economic arguments or arguments that presume aspirations toward a lifestyle centering on higher education and a 9-to-5 career that drives an economic engine of the community. Reading for pleasure or true self-actualization is de-emphasized. Prison officials make their presumptions clear through the reading materials that they censor and the reading materials they encourage.

## 6 Prison Libraries as Affirming Censorship and Behavioral Control

Practically every state and federal prison facility in the United States provides some access to reading material and information through prison libraries, although the level of access in local jails varies much more widely. Prison libraries generally contain general interest content and legal materials, and may or may not be staffed by a professional librarian (Lehmann, 2011). Many library collections in carceral facilities are small, and face limitations related to collection development due to institutional constraints and censorship, a lack of guaranteed funding (most library collections in prisons are funded through the Inmate Welfare Fund, which is sourced through commissary sales, and those funds are split between programs in the prison -- Conrad, 2017), and some libraries do not have librarians with formal training who oversee collection development and materials distribution.

The existing philosophical frames for providing books and library services to those in prison are shaped by the intersections of librarianship, logics of incarceration, and larger societal prejudices which are reaffirmed by both libraries and prisons. Broadly, American prisons began as penal institutions intent on punishment and offered few reading materials. Humanitarian and religious motivations led good samaritans to begin furnishing religious books to people in prison so that they could identify and atone for their sins (Rubin, 1973; Sullivan, 1989). Books, controlled largely by the clergy and prison chaplains, intended to strengthen character, enhance religious devotion, and modify behavior were the norm in most prisons. By the Progressive Era, a Prison Reform Movement began with the belief that rehabilitation, rather than retribution, was possible if people in prison were educated and rewarded for good behavior. Prison libraries were part of these incentives (Lehmann, 2011; Sullivan 1989). By the 1930s, prison reformers and the ALA began publishing studies of prison libraries, notably Austin MacCormick’s 1931 *The Education of Adult Prisoners*. The decades which followed saw considerable growth in prison libraries, particularly at the federal level. By the 1970s, states began implementing prison libraries, especially after Congress authorized funding for libraries in state correctional institutions in 1966 with the Library Services and Construction Act (Lehmann 2011) and a 1977 Supreme Court Decision (*Bounds v. Smith*), which stipulated that all prisons must provide “meaningful access to the courts through people trained in law or through law library collections.” This was largely in response to incarcerated people’s self-advocacy and agitation for information access. Subsequent court decisions and states’ interpretations have weakened these legal collections (Lehmann, 2011). For general prison library collections, the ALA issued Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions in 1981, a document which was revised and expanded in 1992. These documents suggest that prison libraries emulate the public library model, providing free access to information and offering the same variety of material as the outside community. That is, prison libraries should uphold the values at the heart of librarianship, and LIS: access, democracy, diversity and intellectual freedom.

Rather than upholding these values, prison libraries largely reaffirm the state’s logic of censorship and behavioral control (Bouchard and Winnicki, 2000; Coyle, 1987), even as they may try to emphasize access (Higgins, 2017). Prison libraries actively participate in the efforts of the carceral institution (i.e., acting as an extension of the jail or prison rather than as a librarian providing services within an institution). As Doyle (2013) notes, “Everyone, and everything, within the prison system is controlled by the State. Libraries and book programs are there only because the State allows them to be, and this beneficence comes at a high price.” Geary (2003) reminds librarians that “prison librarians are part of the organization that locks up the prisoners. They are professionals who serve the institution as well as the inmates. Basic beliefs in intellectual freedom, censorship, and public service may all be compromised.”

Even prison librarians that approach information through a lens of increased access, in the tradition of Vogel’s prison librarianship texts (1995, 2009), will find themselves mired in the censorship decisions made by local, state, or federal carceral systems, and a tradition within librarianship that prioritizes the idea that a library’s central role in

a carceral facility is in decreasing eventual recidivism. Like many trained librarians, prison librarians also generally lack the skills and background knowledge needed to provide meaningful information access to Black, Indigenous, and people of color, people who are poor, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ and transgender and gender non-conforming people (i.e. the groups of people most likely to be surveilled, policed, and incarcerated). In addition to a lack of training, the impetus toward control and state-directed rehabilitation illustrate that increasing the number of books in prison libraries will not necessarily increase information access. More competent and aware librarians face many tensions as they attempt to balance the restrictions placed by carceral institutions against the materials their patrons most desire, often while operating in relative professional isolation and with meager budgets (Conrad, 2017). They must navigate the power structure of the institution (Arford, 2016). When librarians in prisons do advocate for patron access and push against censorship, they are beholden to the staff who oversee prison operations and must often compromise their professional ethics in order to continue to provide library services.

Even when libraries in prisons are well-stocked (or stocked to the best of the librarian's abilities) and well-funded, there is no guarantee that books will find their readers and readers their books. Many other issues compound the skewing effect of philosophies of rehabilitation. Access to a prison library is mediated by prisons' rules on having a certain number of staff for movement (the carceral term for escorting people who are incarcerated), correctional facilities' policies on regulating types of materials, and whether or not the person desiring a book is detained in an area of the prison that limits movement between locations (for example, administrative segregation, also known as solitary, mental health observation, or a high-observation medical area). Many prisons will not allow hardcover materials, which means that newer releases are unavailable within carceral facilities. Published materials rarely include completely up-to-date materials on topics that are constantly changing, including, among other areas, popular culture and science and technology. Non-Christian religious materials may exist in oral or other traditions that are easily conveyed online but are not often published through traditional publishers or sold through the primary purveyors of library materials. These are just a few examples to provide a context for how constrictive carceral regulations and philosophies shape the types of requests for books and information that groups who provide books to incarcerated people receive.

Prison systems often ground their arguments for censorship, especially in relation to content-neutral restrictions on where people in prison can access books, by touting the on-site libraries. They share staged photos on social media with happy librarians and highlight programs like "reading challenges" (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 2019). These narratives ignore the real experiences that many incarcerated people have with their prison libraries. In corresponding with Pittsburgh Book 'Em, incarcerated readers have described: only having access to the library once or twice a week; having rapidly read through all the books by authors they enjoyed; not having access to the library at all because they were in a Restricted Housing Unit (RHU); and libraries not stocking the subjects that they sought to read. One man explained that "although we have an institutional library, it is constrained by budgetary limitations as well as censorship. For example, there are relatively few books on progressive politics and LGBT issues" (personal correspondence with Book 'Em, 2018). The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has produced promotional materials demonstrating that people in their facilities are limited to a maximum of 90 minutes of library use each week, yet has attempted to frame that as a generous amount of time (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Podcast, 2018). This limitation is compounded by the fact that access to information is often not possible through other avenues (such as Internet access with or without surveillance).

In addition to the paucity of typical library access in most facilities, individual library access may be restricted by prison officials as a disciplinary action. This restriction may come from prison library administrators when library policies are perceived as not being followed, by correctional officers for behaviors unrelated to the library or books, or because prison staff are trying to enforce policies set by the carceral facility around the number of library books a person can have in their cell or living area at one time. Rarely is restriction of library access a formal disciplinary policy. Instead, it is implemented on a case-by-case basis with limited oversight (Conrad, 2017).

Beyond restricting library access on an individual level, prisons regularly deny access to a large population of extremely vulnerable people: those being housed in solitary confinement. Although some prisons offer limited alternatives for those being housed in solitary to access books, including allowing individuals to submit request forms to the library administrators or mobile book carts, these options do not achieve a comparable level of access compared to in-person visits to the library (Conrad, 2017). With more than 80,000 people held in solitary confinement at any

time (Nolan and Amico, 2017), a significant percentage of the prison population does not have regular access to the libraries. Those 80,000 people are 5% of the total people detained in “male” prisons and 2% of the people detained in “female” prisons; people in solitary confinement are disproportionately Black and LGBTQ people. Black men make up 40% of the U.S. prison population, but 45% of the population held in solitary confinement (Nolan and Amico, 2017). Solitary confinement is not solely used as a disciplinary action, but often used to remove someone at risk of being victimized by other prisoners from the general population. This “protective custody” is regularly used with LGBTQ people in prison who are more likely to be the targets physical and sexual violence in prisons than the rest of the population.

Resources available at prison libraries are designed to be returned and circulated among multiple people as requested and not retained by an individual. Reference materials like dictionaries and thesauri that people would want consistent access to or interactive books like Sudoku puzzles, crosswords, or work books do not fit into the library model. Prisons often have these publications available for purchase at commissary or through their publication vendor, but not for free. It is extremely difficult for many people who are incarcerated to easily afford these materials.

In addition to reaffirming the logics of carceral institutions, prison libraries are inherently linked to the history of library services in the United States, which reiterate and reconstitute society’s prejudices. In the United States, public librarianship was founded in the logics of the mid-1800s and early-1900s. The dominant scientific and philosophical conceptions of worth during this period affirmed the cultural and moral superiority of whiteness through the limitation and regulation of information for people considered other than white (Digital Public Library of America, 2019). White womanhood was viewed as a pure arbiter of (God’s) truth and often facilitated early American imperial projects. Within librarianship, white womanhood was interpreted as a tool librarians could use to civilize and enculturate people viewed as Others (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016). While libraries maintained legal and de jure segregation against Black people well into the mid-1900s, they were particularly concerned with providing services that could Americanize and enculturate immigrant groups viewed as salvageable or valuable to whiteness (Jones 1999). The enculturation projects aimed at immigrant populations often involved the incorporation of community libraries that had been built and maintained by those groups (Jones, 1999). Projects to secure whiteness as a norm were not always uncontested within librarianship, even as the majority of people who were formally recognized as librarians were white (Knott, 2015; Robbins, 2000; Weigand and Weigand, 2018).

As a profession, librarianship has often been unwilling to incorporate criticisms or models that have not reaffirmed the connection between information, whiteness, and power. The “prejudices and antipathies” of mainstream American society continued to structure library collections and organization systems (Berman, 1971). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully outline the confluence of information, whiteness, and power, a brief review of cataloging language related to criminality and sexuality reveals the pervasiveness of racism and homophobia historically present in the profession.

Berman’s examination of how categorization in the Library of Congress subheadings reflected denigrative terms for racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities (as well as women, youth, disabled people, and champions of progressive and leftist political causes) provides a few stark examples of how logics that informed incarceration were reinforced in librarianship. For instance, in a 1971 text Berman noted Lynching, I 27-67 contained a cross-reference to “criminal justice, administration of.” and only two adjectival forms of criminal existed, “Negro criminals” and “Jewish criminals.” Berman’s work offers one example of how the racialization of criminality through state practices of containment were replayed and affirmed within librarianship. More recently, advocates for LGBTQ information access have drawn from Berman’s work to address homophobia and bias in subject headings related to LGBTQ identity and experience. This work has led to changes in the language used to classify materials on gay and lesbian topics, yet transphobia persists in the (mis)classification of materials related transgender topics (Roberto, 2011). Biases in cataloging language align with the high rates of policing, incarceration, and other forms of violence that transgender people, especially transgender people of color and most often Black transgender women, experience over their lifetimes (Spade, 2011; Stanley and Smith, 2011). Given the flaws of classification systems and the language they utilize, many contend that bias persists and perpetuates “the exclusionary cultural supremacy of the mainstream patriarchal, Euro-settler culture” (Olson, 2000).

Recent attempts on the part of the profession to create more culturally competent and critically aware library services have led to some intercessions, but these do not address the ways in which the field has been structured toward whiteness, heterosexuality and cisgender experience, and middle class belonging. Numerous academics and

professionals have drawn from existing critical research within the field and taken it upon themselves to challenge the field to do more to address its own biases and tendencies toward normative power structures. Among these are attempts to trace publications that discuss race and racism as related to library history, how to introduce social justice as a tenet of librarianship, examinations of how the field aligns with nationalist projects, and critical interrogations of how the profession utilizes the language of diversity to sidestep its own histories of and current practices that are steeped in racism and other oppressions (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016; Hathcock, 2015; Mehra and Rioux, 2016; Sierpe, 2019; Velez and Villa-Nicholas, 2017). These and other passionate scholars are advocating for the restructuring of librarianship in ways that address historical harms that continue to shape the field.

Prison librarians, like many other librarians and information professionals, have been trained within a profession steeped in histories of racism and systemic oppression that has yet to grapple with the hard truths of its history. This is not to discount the work that prison librarians do to provide access to materials as they can, to advocate for their patrons, or to resist censorship when possible. Rather it is to note that many librarians, in and outside of prison, perpetuate the whiteness of the field in their everyday library practice and decision making. Even if this is not the case across the board, communications between people who are incarcerated and Books to Prisoners groups reveal that prison libraries reaffirm many of the prejudices of librarianship while continuing to censor and modify behavior as called for by the logics of incarceration. The requests that Books to Prisoners programs receive expose the aftereffects of state practices that reiterate oppression through information control.

## 7 Recognition and Connection: Books to Prisoners programs

While still having to adhere to state guidelines, Books to Prisoners programs have long been addressing some of the shortcomings of prison libraries and calling out state oppression. Books to Prisoners programs fill the requests made by people who are incarcerated for particular subjects, genres, authors, or titles at no cost to the person making the request. Most of these organizations rely primarily on book donations from their surrounding communities, so requested publications are not always in stock. Many Books to Prisoners groups utilize wish list tools to source publications that specifically match the requests. Because they directly receive specific book requests from people who are incarcerated, these programs are intimately familiar with the needs of these readers and the constraints of the prison system.

Books provided to individuals through Books to Prisoners programs help to connect those who are incarcerated with the larger community. Carceral practices routinely separate people from their communities by physically (re)moving people, at times considerable distances, from their support networks, limiting visitation and phone calls with those on the outside, and isolating people within the prison itself. While considerable literature exists which suggests that strong social ties improve quality of life while incarcerated and after incarceration (i.e. Berg and Huebner 2011; Bales and Mears 2008; Jiang and Winfree 2006), prisons and jails routinely break these social bonds.

Books to Prisoners groups renew these bonds by building connections between those who are incarcerated and those in the free world. This potential is clear in the correspondence received by Books to Prisoners programs. One incarcerated reader writes, “My son is half Russian and for that reason I have had an interest in the culture for quite some time. Thank you for the books, they’re not only amazing literature, but they create a much needed point of contact with my child” (personal correspondence with Prison Scholar Fund, 2019). Another reader writes, “I have a son that is losing his hearing. My son’s mother told me by the time I get out of here he will be completely deaf. I would appreciate any sign language books that will help me to communicate with my son” (personal correspondence with Books to Prisoners Seattle, 2015).

These connections are particularly important for LGBTQ people in prison, many of whom lost family when their families became aware that they are LGTBQ. As one incarcerated person wrote, “I’m currently in prison in Nevada. As a gay male in prison it’s hard. I do not know of many organizations that offer to help inmates. I have come out as gay about 3 years ago. I have lost all contact with family and friends over my sexuality. I struggled for years with my sexuality... As you may know being who I am is tough in prison and having no family support in any way because of my sexuality makes it that much harder” (personal correspondence with LGBT Books to Prisoners, 2016). Another person wrote “Programs and volunteers like you mean so much to those of us without outside support. Being specifically

LGBT-oriented is even better! It makes me remember that I have ‘family’ out there that cares” (personal correspondence with LGBT Books to Prisoners, 2019). By providing books and a personal note to these individuals, Books to Prisoners programs affirm stigmatized identities while building a community of LGBTQ people and allies who will support each other regardless of sexual orientation. These connections have consequences for the emotional well-being of people in prison. As one gay man incarcerated in New York wrote “I received love in the form of books from you guys and ladys. I just want to say thank you for showing us that we mean something. What you do reminds me that I am human and not some foreign creature. Thank you so much for your generosity, and most importantly your love” (personal correspondence with LGBT Books to Prisoners, 2019).

Books to Prisoners programs cater to the needs and interests of people in prison in a system that routinely removes agency. By providing a full range of books on individuals’ own terms, which may have little to do with the neoliberal logics of books as cultivating a “civilization of the mind” but instead emphasize pleasure and self-actualization, books can restore agency. The diversity of needs met by a small number of books is visible in this letter from an incarcerated person in prison: “I don’t expect a response but wanted to let you know I finished reading the five books you chose for me. How you decided to choose them I do not know but they are all winners as far as I am concerned. ALL OUR TRIALS is inspiring me and assisting me with my case. QUEER/TRANS ARTISTS OF COLOR is equally as inspiring for my future plans. SAME SEX UNIONS by Boswell was packed with important history. NAKED by Sedaris had me laughing non-stop, and I very much related to PUNK LOVE FOUCAULT. I just wanted to let you know you hit 100% with me on these choices. You’ve helped make my incarceration a bit easier” (personal correspondence with LGBT Books to Prisoners, 2019).

Books that affirm gender, racial, and sexual identities communicate care. After receiving books from LGBT Books to Prisoners, a transgender woman wrote,

*“Dear caring soul, Thank you all SO MUCH for sending me ‘Trans Bodies, Trans Selves,’ this tome has been wonderful for me as I have no transgenders to talk to and the LGBQ folk don’t get what the T is in their own community so I am marginalized by the marginalized. I get more support (really tolerance) from my D&D group.*

*The book you also sent, “Curly Girl” has been transformational with how I look at and care for my corkscrew curls (hint: no shampoo, only conditioners) and my self-worth now that a major part of my identity (my hair) looks more like - me? How I identify.*

*In short, your very real support has been very nearly as important to me as the hope of being able to receive hormones and testosterone blockers. These two books have been and continue to be transformational for me.”* (personal correspondence with LGBT Books to Prisoners, 2019).

A letter sent to Books to Prisoners Seattle by a Latinx prisoner in Washington echoes these themes of affirmation and care of both body and soul:

*“I am interested in Meso-American culture like the Aztecs, Mayan, or Incas. I like to read a lot of Mexican history also. I am in the process of spiritual healing so if you have anything that has to do with Mexican or Meso-American enlightenment. I would even like to read Mexican revolutionary books or autobiograph[ies] on any positive Chicano heroes like Cesar Chavez.”* (personal correspondence with Books to Prisoners Seattle, 2016)

In a system which censors, marginalizes, policies, and denies these identities, books help with self-actualization of identities that may not be supported by the state and which may be rejected by the logics of bibliotherapy. Books to Prisoners groups make access to these types of materials possible.

## 8 Conclusion

Prison censorship has stymied book access for decades. In 1971, an article in the Yale Law Journal posited,

*If definitive evidence were to show that prohibition, inspection or censorship of inmate mail were essential components of an effective rehabilitative process, it is conceivable that their presumptive unconstitutionality as prior restraints would be overcome. At present, however, no “hard” data is available, and it is doubtful that prison personnel can identify what information would or would not retard rehabilitation.*



Nearly fifty years after those words were written, we are no closer to being provided with any such data, yet censorship persists in ways that increasingly target and isolate Black, Indigenous, and people of color and LGBTQ people in prison. In the words of prison librarian Erin Boyington, “books aren’t the problem, and censorship isn’t the solution” (quoted in Orlofsky, 2019). If we intend to address how social inequalities and prejudices are shaped and reified through incarceration, the study of prison censorship--and how people in prisons and their support networks work to circumvent it--can offer lessons on resistance.

Before LIS can begin to resist the censorship and behavioral control inherent in incarceration, it must grapple with its own history of whiteness and information control. As a profession, LIS embraces narratives of information access and resists censorship, especially in its professional materials and coordinated public declarations, and coordinated programming (such as Banned Books Week). Yet, despite the awareness-raising attempted by individual librarians within the field, there has been little coordinated professional-level response to censorship attempts. Given the racialized and gendered nature of policing and incarceration in the United States, this silence reveals a historical tradition within LIS that has yet to be unmoored from contemporary library practice. LIS has been rooted in whiteness, heterosexuality, and gender normativity to the disadvantage of its patrons and professional codes. As Ettarh (2018) succinctly states, “[l]ibrarianship, like the criminal justice system and the government, is an institution. And like other institutions, librarianship plays a role in creating and sustaining hegemonic values, as well as contributing to white supremacy culture.” As such, it is necessary to recognize how systemic oppression within the institution is reflected in library services for people who are incarcerated. First, that people who are incarcerated in America today feel the impact of a present lack of recognition as a patron base within the field. Second, that the lack of information access for people who are incarcerated has likely been made possible due the LIS’ normatively-centered attention to some patrons and disregard for others. Rallying efforts to resist censorship within carceral institutions, to increase information access for incarcerated people, to build broadly meaningful and well-funded collections for people who are incarcerated, and to support the work of Books to Prisoners programs is one way in which librarians, and the profession as a whole, can begin to address its ongoing practices of exclusion.

The practitioners in this article clearly advocate for increased information access for people inside of carceral facilities. The impact of their efforts, as reflected in the few responses from incarcerated people included in this article, are immeasurable. Yet, if trends continue, these groups, primarily volunteer-based and community organized, may not have the social and political power needed to resist ongoing censorship attempts on the part of carceral facilities across the country. Because of both content-neutral censorship and content-based censorship, Books to Prisoners programs encounter significant difficulties with providing materials as requested. This moment offers a point of entrance (one among many) for LIS professionals to recognize that restricting the information access of incarcerated people has a much larger social effect. LIS professionals can engage in a resistance to state oppression through information control alongside incarcerated individuals and Books to Prisoners groups.

The carceral terrain of the United States is so vast that there are many points of action LIS professionals might take from here. These include reading some of the books about race and racism, specifically within the criminal justice system and mass incarceration, that have been listed in this article as books that have been banned, and sharing that information with their colleagues. LIS professionals might look to already existing library programs providing information and materials to people who are incarcerated or are in the process of reentry. They can (and should) approach programs already working to support the information needs of incarcerated people to identify how library resources might be extended to further those pursuits. They can utilize already established modes of programming and information distribution to shed more light on incarceration and its effects, not only on individuals, but on the communities that libraries serve. As people skilled specifically in providing information, LIS professionals have much to lend to resisting the encroachment of policing and incarceration, and its ongoing effects, as everyday aspects of life in the United States. Resisting censorship and providing information is the mantle of LIS. Now is the time to take it up, in recognition that there are many, many patrons who have been overlooked and disregarded in the profession’s claims to providing access to all.

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