



Censorship in Public Libraries

Public libraries can experience censorship in several ways. Despite the differences, the main goal remains the same: to suppress or restrict access to ideas, information, or creative works. Below is a simplified breakdown of how censorship happens in public libraries and how to identify it when it occurs.



Direct Censorship

Definition

Outright bans or removals of books, films, or other materials by authorities, organizations, or individuals

Example 1

A public library completely removes *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, which was located in the adult section, after receiving a patron complaint saying the book was the “vilest” thing they ever read.

Example 2

The mayor meets with the library director, a city employee. The director is given a list of books and told to secretly remove them from the collection.

Why it Matters:

The First Amendment protects the [“corollary rights to listen and to receive information”](#) and legal precedent reinforces these protections by determining libraries [the “quintessential” information recipient](#)

Soft Censorship

Definition

Internal decisions to limit the availability and accessibility of materials based on personal ideology or to avoid threats to funding and personnel

Example 1

A librarian considers purchasing a recently published biography of Donald Trump, but despite objective data showing it should be added to the collection, the librarian refuses to purchase it because he’s a Democrat and personally dislikes Donald Trump.

Example 2

A library director decides to cross-reference their collection with the local Moms For Liberty chapter’s “inappropriate” book list. The director finds 10 titles and, to avoid challenges and controversy from the local Moms For Liberty group, the director decides to “weed” or remove the books from the library, despite circulation data showing they are frequently checked out.

Why it Matters:

Librarians who make ideologically-based purchasing and weeding decisions create collections that only reflect one specific viewpoint and restrict others’ access to any books outside that viewpoint. Accredited Library Science graduate degree programs help educate librarians to develop collections based on objective data, which helps prevent viewpoint discrimination.

Relocation of Age-Appropriate Materials

Definition

Moving books from their age-appropriate section to a less accessible one, often under the pretense of “protecting” younger audiences

Example

A teen novel, *Different Kinds of Fruit* by Kyle Lukoff, is moved from the Young Adult section to the adult section, restricting access for the intended readers as it becomes harder to locate, or in some cases completely restricted for minors, in the adult section.

Why it Matters:

Moving age-appropriate books from the children’s or teen section makes them less visible and harder to access. Relocating sends a message to the community that these books are “inappropriate” or “shameful” and should be avoided.

Age-Based Borrowing Restrictions

Definition

Placing rules on the library cards of minors which restrict borrowing privileges to children’s and/or teen sections

Example

A 17-year-old high school junior is required to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston for her AP English class; to save costs, she wants to borrow it from the library, but their new tiered borrowing card system restricts her from borrowing any book from the adult section.

Why it Matters:

Age-based borrowing restrictions prevent minors from borrowing books and accessing essential information.

“Common Sense Processes”: Book Relocation & Borrowing Restrictions

Definition

Processes created by extremist groups by merging two types of censorship into one giant restrictive barrier for minors under 18 years old

Example

A library moves 200 teen books from their appropriate section to the adult section. To further restrict access, they create a tiered borrowing card system that restricts minors under 18 from borrowing anything from the adult section.

Why it Matters:

Restricting access to material because of one group’s ideological beliefs contradicts our nation’s value of freedom of choice. It elevates the viewpoint of a single fringe group as “common sense” while condemning the viewpoints of other Americans and forcing them to conform to practices that betray the convictions of their conscience. Everyone has the freedom to choose not to read a book they find on library shelves, but if a book is kept off the shelf or hidden from its intended audience because it offends someone in the community, it keeps all readers from having the choice to read according to their own conscience.