

In Their Own Words

**Reporting & Organizing Youth Testimonials of
Censorship from Books Unbanned**

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Our sponsors

- Brooklyn Public Library
 - **Amy Mikel**, Director of Customer Experience
 - **Leigh Hurwitz**, Collections Manager
- Seattle Public Library
 - **Bo Kinney**, Circulation Services Manager
 - **Elisa Murray**, Digital Communications Strategist
 - **Karly Williams**, Public Records Coordinator



In April 2022, Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) launched [Books Unbanned](#), granting teens and young adults in the U.S., ages 13-21, **free access to its entire digital collection of over half a million eBooks and audiobooks**. Inspired by the American Library Association's [Freedom to Read Statement](#) and the [Library Bill of Rights](#), Brooklyn Public Library founded Books Unbanned to defend young people's right to read amid an unprecedented wave of book challenges and bans.

The Seattle Public Library (SPL) followed suit in April 2023, offering free access to its digital collection for anyone in the U.S., ages 13-26. Since then, **more libraries have joined in opening their collections to preserve access for young people**: the Boston Public Library, the Los Angeles County Library, and the San Diego Public Library.

Books Unbanned responds to an **increasingly coordinated and effective effort to remove books** tackling a wide range of topics from library shelves in schools and public libraries nationwide. Partnering libraries provide free digital library cards to teens across the country to enhance access to frequently banned materials and support the freedom to read.



Books Unbanned.

Books Unbanned by the Numbers



Cards distributed:
Over 12,750 cards



Books checked out:
Over 286,000



Number of Testimonials
Nearly 10,000



Number of Renewals
Nearly 1,000
BPL only, starting April 2023

Books Unbanned by the Numbers

CARDHOLDERS BY AGE

13–18



19–21

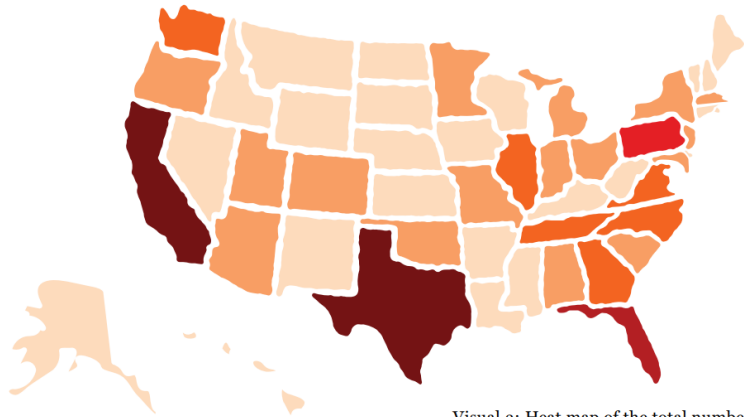


22–26

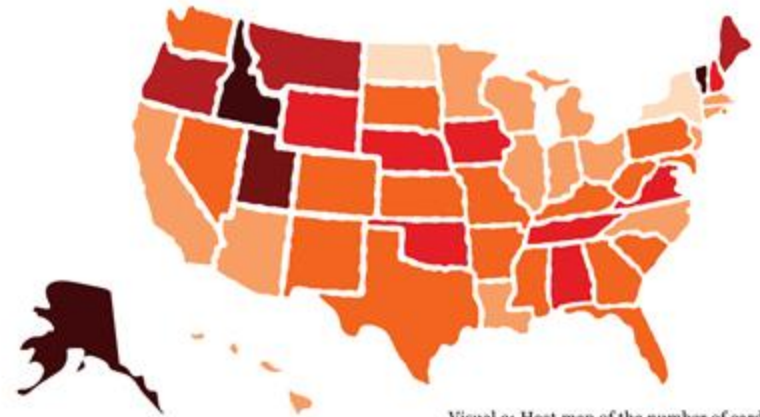


Visual 1: Total cardholders per age range issued by both Brooklyn Public Library and The Seattle Public Library

Books Unbanned by the Numbers



Visual 2: Heat map of the total number of cardholders by state



Visual 3: Heat map of the number of cardholders per 100k people in each state

MAPPING THE REQUESTS

LESS  MORE

Additional representation not shown on maps includes Washington D.C., American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico.

The Problem

Across the country, young people continue to face rising attempts of book bans, censorship, and political challenges in their local school and public libraries. When Books Unbanned launched, card applicants were invited to share how they were being impacted by book bans and what having access to the card would mean to them.

In the two years since BPL started Books Unbanned and SPL joined a year later, the two libraries have received an outpouring of **nearly 10,000 testimonials from young people** across the country. These testimonials shed light on the multitude of challenges they face in accessing materials and their desire to have the freedom to choose what they read.

Although not the initial intention, the libraries came to realize they were amassing an invaluable collection of stories, one that captures a vital perspective in this alarming historical moment. The **stories shocked, inspired, and galvanized the libraries to shine a light on their voices** and made the mission behind Books Unbanned—to provide access to stories for young people—even more urgent.

The libraries enlisted the support of our Capstone team to analyze and organize the collection of testimonials across both libraries, to help them **better understand their users, broadly communicate their message to the wider public, and aid in the long-term stewardship** of these stories as the collection continues to grow.

“ This library card is important to me because it gives me access to high-quality educational and cultural resources that I would not be able to afford otherwise. As an online high school student, I do not have a physical library nearby that I can visit, so having an eCard makes me feel connected.” —Age 17, Texas

Objectives

- Deepen understanding of the challenges faced by Books Unbanned users by analyzing common themes and trends in their testimonials
- Compile significant findings into a comprehensive public report communicating the impact of growing restrictions on young people's freedom to read, particularly LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC youth whose identities are often the target of censorship campaigns
- Share the report with a range of stakeholders, including current and potential funders, libraries, and the general public. Through the report we aim to increase awareness of the challenges young people are facing and inspire action to address those challenges, including through continued support of the Books Unbanned program
- Develop a database complete with an organizational strategy to help libraries manage the expanding collection of youth testimonials, allowing for ongoing analysis and reporting

Process



Synthesizing Data

Cardholder testimonials from Brooklyn Public Library and Seattle Public Library were consolidated from different sources (applications, emails, & Instagram DMs) for easier tagging, data analysis, and archiving.

Data Analysis

A sample of testimonials were analyzed for key themes of censorship and its origins, access issues, and impact of Books Unbanned.

We focused our efforts on analyzing shareable stories to identify cardholders' access needs, and the renewal applications to assess the impact of the program.

Impact Report

A report was then drafted to show the results of our analysis, illustrating the effects of book bans and barriers to access experienced by teens.

We aimed to provide recommendations for visualization strategies and determine the best approach to represent the voices of cardholders.

Database

A system for housing testimonials was also requested to help with future data analysis and tracking the impact of Books Unbanned.

We developed a taxonomy for the database to help standardize the terms used for tagging data. Both the taxonomy and database were proposed with the future of Books Unbanned in mind, as the program continues to grow.

In Their Own Words: Youth Voices on Books Unbanned

- The report we co-authored with BPL and SPL was published on April 10th, 2024, and is free to access on the Books Unbanned website.
- Audience for the report includes:
 - The general public, to increase awareness of the impact of censorship on youth as well as the Books Unbanned initiative
 - Donors who can contribute to funding and help expand the program
 - Librarians, to create awareness of the needs of youth regarding interest in materials and gaps in their current collections
 - Vendors, to discuss the need for accessible and affordable digital collections
- Testimonials like the ones below were compiled and analyzed in the report, outlining types of censorship and other barriers to access faced by teens and young adults applying for a Books Unbanned card
- The report gives voice to those directly affected by censorship and book bans that are often not heard in existing reports on legislation and lists of banned books and subject matter

Coverage

- [How SPLs Books Unbanned Card is Fighting Censorship](#) - Seattle Times
- [Libraries Get Insight on How Censorship, Library Access Impacts Teens](#) - Scripps News [article + TV segment]
- [New Report: "In Their Own Words, Youth Voices on Books Unbanned."](#) - InfoDocket
- [BPL, SPL Release Joint Report on Banned Books](#) - Publisher's Weekly
- [What Young People Can Do About Book Bans: Book Censorship News](#) - BookRiot

“ I am severely visually impaired and can't read physical book copies. Having a wide selection of audiobooks and accessible ebooks helps me access the same amount of literature as my sighted peers.”

—Age 15, Washington

“ I have been using my library card to access digital books that unfortunately are rarely available in my library. These include books with LGBTQ+ and autistic representation, which has been life-changing to me as an autistic queer kid.” —Age 19, Florida

4. Censorship:

“Entirely cleared out and locked in a closet”

THE TESTIMONIALS ANALYZED for the report shared a variety of censorship types and sources of restriction.

Books Unbanned cardholders reported that the subject matter they could not access because of challenges, bans, restrictions and other limitations was primarily targeted towards **LGBTQIA+** and **BIPOC** centered content. Specific themes of the targeted subject matter included racial and social justice, reproductive health and sexuality, and different or difficult life experiences, especially those portrayed in a historical context.

Cardholders often pointed to more subtle forms of censorship that don't fit within concrete categories. Many reported that they faced surveillance at home and school, sharing stories of not being allowed to take out certain materials based on the personal feelings of authority figures

such as parents, teachers, and library staff. Others shared stories of retaliation observed against teachers and librarians within their communities, illustrating the real risks for those who don't comply with the pressures to censor.

Book banning campaigns driven by advocacy groups and elected officials result in the visible forms of censorship we often see in reporting: long lists of challenged and banned titles and increasing state legislation that prohibits material based on vague criteria and exposes librarians and educators to criminal liability. The stories found among those requesting access to digital library cards show the hidden forms of censorship they face that are far more difficult to report on but are intensified by the increasing atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and inflammatory rhetoric.

“ [T]here are some books that I want to read but because they are too explicitly gay, I was told by the librarian at my local library that even if it becomes one of their most requested books the library would never even consider them...”
—Age 20, Washington

“ I love the book *The Hate U Give* and think it is important, but it was decided I cannot use that for a book report...” —Age 13, Arkansas

TARGETED CONTENT

THE STORIES SHARED about censorship and challenges to reading materials tended to fall into a few subject matter categories, all of which corresponded with reporting done by PEN America. While listed separately here, the themes often overlapped in the reported content.



LGBTQIA+ CENTERED CONTENT

Repeatedly, cardholders reported being unable to access titles that feature lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and/or asexual subjects or characters. Transgender representation was often mentioned.



BIPOC CENTERED CONTENT

Another theme was censorship of authors and experiences of those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Many noted absences of Black, Asian, and multiracial identities in library collections and not seeing themselves represented.



RACIAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Cardholders frequently reported being unable to access materials related to critical race theory (CRT), race/racism in the United States, police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement—and materials related to social justice generally, gender equality and feminism.



REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND SEXUALITY

Cardholders described not being able to access information about human sexuality, reproductive health, abortion care, and sex education.



HISTORICAL TOPICS

Cardholders described restrictions on content covering areas of history including American chattel slavery, the Holocaust, LGBTQIA+ history, and the pursuit of equal rights. Multiple comments referred to the frequent censorship of textbooks and academic materials.



DIFFERENT/DIFFICULT LIFE EXPERIENCES

Young readers reported a lack of access to materials related to experiences outside of their communities, cultures or religions—in addition to materials that reflect difficult life experiences they may know and face, from substance use disorder to sexual assault.



FINDING YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

Some cardholders reported a lack of access to stories written for their demographic because of limited collections or age-based restrictions.

“ My scho... and the... piece of... —Age 15,

“ [My sta... history... parents,

“ Idaho h... inappro... *Fahrenh... young a... handle... have son...*

“ One tim... that it w... only in t... on what...

“ Applin... deeply b... that doe...

Key Report Findings

Our exploration of youth testimonials affirmed much of what we have already learned through existing reporting on book banning campaigns, including which titles and subject matter are the most targeted. But we also gained insight to the **true nature of the challenges young people are facing and how vital programs like Books Unbanned are in protecting access for those who are most affected**. Our key findings shared here were illustrated in our report with direct quotes from youth testimonials and visualizations displaying the frequency of observed themes.

- 1 | Hidden forms of censorship:** Young people face forms of censorship that are difficult to capture in existing reporting—including self-censorship, surveillance at home or school, and individual restrictions by authority figures, **all of which have been intensified by the increasing atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and inflammatory rhetoric.**

“The Idaho House passed Bill 666, which would allow schools and librarians to be prosecuted, under vague language, for ‘disseminating material that is harmful to minors.’ Librarians are supposed to help encourage that exploration, not live in fear of what the government has to say about their service to the world.” —Age 18, Idaho

TYPES OF CENSORSHIP CITED BY CARDHOLDERS

CENSORSHIP

The suppression of ideas and information by individuals or groups who possess authority or power over their expression and circulation.

Policy change authorizing a school or library board to oversee book selections

School or library preemptively restricting or removing books due to fear of repercussions

Suppression of information or ideas is reported but specific form or source is not clearly disclosed

BANS

The removal of materials from a library based on the objections of a person or group.

Legislative action that results in removal of materials

Decision by school or library board to remove materials, often as the result of a challenge

Bans and restrictions based on objections to a book's contents are considered acts of censorship. Cardholders often reported the hidden impacts of censorship (e.g. self-censorship; fear of future censorship) due to the environment of fear and intimidation it creates.

CHALLENGES

An attempt to have a library resource removed, or access to it restricted, based on the objections of a person or group.

Advocacy groups or parents demanding lists of materials be removed or restricted

Elected officials pressuring school districts and libraries to remove certain materials

RESTRICTIONS

Creating barriers to access of library materials such as moving titles to sections they weren't intended for.

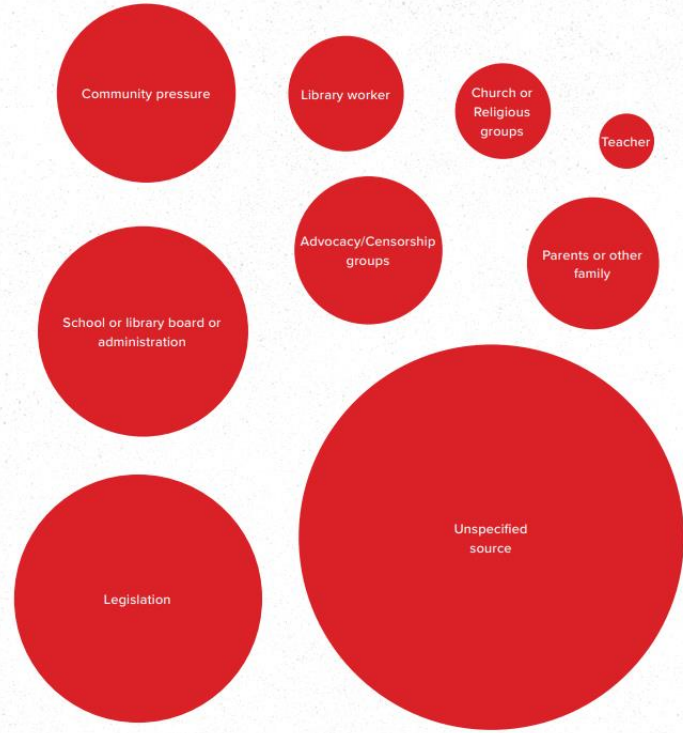
Age restrictions/parental permission for check-out

Parent won't allow materials at home or library staff refuse to check out certain materials

Labeling books with a prejudicial content warning or rating

Taking books out of the online catalog or placing behind a desk so they must be requested from staff

ORIGINS OF CENSORSHIP CITED BY CARDHOLDERS



“ Access pretty s be pret

“ I ident LGBT+ about p

“ Reading charac import –Age 17

“ The lib conserv surrou person –Age 17

“ There a in dang give[s]

book copies. books helps peers.”

fferent es growing 1.”

iobook

ressing topics g to do the United uld find –Age 15, Illinois

ks that include books een life- a

Key Report Findings

- 2 | Other barriers to access:** Censorship builds upon and reinforces already existing barriers to access. **Many report facing several issues simultaneously:** they are unable to afford all of the books they want or need to keep up with their reading habits and education; they do not have access to a library, for reasons ranging from lack of transportation to being ineligible for a card; or the libraries they do have access to have limited and underfunded collections.

“ I live five minutes away from a public library, but it’s across the county line so they would have charged me \$20 for a six-month library card. The closest in-network library is 35 minutes away and they don’t use Libby or OverDrive. While I’m sure the staff at these libraries do want to make their books & resources accessible, the system seems totally built against it.” —Age 23, Florida

Key Report Findings

- 3 | Impact on marginalized groups:** The inability to access representative materials, **especially for LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC cardholders**, exacerbates feelings of isolation and the sense that their identities are under attack. For many young people, digital access is not just a matter of preference but essential to their ability to read freely. LGBTQIA+ cardholders not yet come out to their family or community need the privacy that digital access provides. Readers with disabilities report needing digital access due to difficulties in reaching their physical library branch and finding limited options in accessible formats.

“ [My state] is passing extreme censorship laws like the ‘don’t say gay law’ and banning teachers [from teaching] about critical race theory and textbooks that might have anything about it in it. I am a Black trans person so this is incredibly stifling for me.” —Age 19, Florida

Key Report Findings

- 4 | Importance of the freedom to read:** Young people are against censorship, and they value having the freedom to read. Censorship campaigns only strengthen their curiosity, with many seeking out banned titles to know what is being kept from them. **They want access to stories that reflect their own experiences and expand their knowledge of others** with backgrounds different from their own.

“ Reading is an escape for me, and getting to escape into a world with characters who I can relate to and make me feel valid is extremely important to me and these opportunities are being taken away.”

—Age 17, Missouri

Key Report Findings

- 5 | Impact of Books Unbanned:** The Books Unbanned program has had a tangible impact in providing access to young people without other options and has been a lifeline for many. Cardholders renewing after one year said they are reading more and engaging in unwanted habits less, nurtured by their newfound access to books. **Their stories demonstrate that the program is supporting a new generation of readers, and that creating access creates more demand.**

“ I have read 44 books this year, most of them through this library. It has gotten me back into reading.” —Age 19, Indiana

Looking Forward: Youth Voices Database

Originally launched as a temporary initiative, Books Unbanned quickly surpassed expectations and received overwhelming response from young people across the country requesting access. **As the relentless wave of censorship shows no signs of slowing, the initiative has shifted its vision from temporary to long-term.** With nearly 10,000 testimonials already collected and continued growth expected, a comprehensive strategy is needed to manage the influx of youth stories flooding in through applications and renewals.

Database

We developed a database solution and series of recommendations that will enable libraries to **organize, manage, upload, and tag stories on a shared platform.** This ensures ongoing stewardship of the growing volume of stories and promotes collaboration among the libraries. Our solution incorporates measures to protect the privacy of youth cardholders.

Looking Forward: Youth Voices Database

Taxonomy

Drawing from domain research, our analysis of common story patterns, and stakeholder interviews to evaluate program needs, we created a finalized **taxonomy of terms related to cardholder reports of censorship, access barriers, and their life circumstances and identities** (for example, self-identification as LGBTQ+, BIPOC, having a disability, or living in a rural area). This standardized tool can now be used by libraries to tag testimonials in the database, providing a comprehensive view of young people's shared experiences.

Use of this tagging system will support:

- Improved organization and searchability of testimonials.
- Making future data analysis projects, like the impact report completed this year, easier.
- Deeper insights into the role of diverse identities and life circumstances in the experience of censorship and access barriers.
- Better tailoring the program to cardholder's expressed needs and interests through tracking the motivations behind their applications.

Looking Forward: Youth Voices Database

Documentation

We created documentation for database and taxonomy use and maintenance, ensuring their **continued effectiveness** to manage continued growth of the testimonial collection and facilitating onboarding of additional partners.

The database and taxonomy will serve as a crucial advocacy tool for the libraries, enabling them to continually learn from and amplify the voices of young people. These voices serve as a counternarrative to those seeking to control and restrict the right to read.

This growing collection of testimonials holds immense significance, filling a gap in existing reporting on book bans and challenges by representing the voices of those most impacted. It's critical that Books Unbanned continues to learn from and share what young people are reporting through these stories.

Capstone team left sponsors with recommendations for future areas of interest to explore with the testimonials.

- Significant population of parents requesting cards on their child's behalf or kids mentioning that their parents recommended them to request the ecards, considering the push for "parental rights."
- Multiple instances where large groups of students are being guided or instructed to request cards, as seen through repetitive occurrences of the same school email, templated language in the requests for cards, and teachers corresponding on how to help their students get access.
- Many request language material that isn't available in their areas.
- Continue tracking and reporting on forms of censorship that may be overlooked by other data collection methods. For example, in our analysis we found evidence of a phenomenon PEN America refers to as "wholesale bans," where entire classrooms and school libraries are cleared of books to address legal risks arising from vaguely worded legislation. They note the difficulty of reporting on these cases but anticipate they will become more prevalent with the introduction of new legislation.

Beyond Capstone

“ The freedom to read is the freedom to explore and uncover worlds that were previously unknown. It is the ability to understand the important conversations being discussed around you, and the decisions that are being made on the Congress floor. To have the freedom to read taken away is equivalent to taking away the ability to see, to talk, to listen, to understand, to be compassionate, and to be informed. How can one learn if they are restricted to a certain selection of books?”

—Age 16, Georgia

Resources

- About book bans & intellectual freedom
 - [ALA Book Ban Data](#)
 - [ALA Freedom to Read Statement](#)
 - [ALA Library Bill of Rights](#)
 - [PEN America: Book Bans](#)
- About Books Unbanned
 - [Books Unbanned](#)
 - [BPL Books Unbanned](#)
 - [SPL Books Unbanned](#)
- Impact report
 - [In Their Own Words: Youth Voices on Books Unbanned](#)
- News stories on impact report
 - [How SPLs Books Unbanned Card is Fighting Censorship](#) - Seattle Times
 - [Libraries Get Insight on How Censorship, Library Access Impacts Teens](#) - Scripps News [article + TV segment]
 - [New Report: "In Their Own Words, Youth Voices on Books Unbanned."](#) - InfoDocket
 - [BPL, SPL Release Joint Report on Banned Books](#) - Publisher's Weekly
 - [What Young People Can Do About Book Bans: Book Censorship News](#) - BookRiot