

[REDACTED]

In Their Own Words.

[REDACTED]

Youth

Voices on

Books Unbanned.

“ They are banning some of my favorite books and it makes me feel very unwelcome in my school. Thank you for helping me.”

—Age 17, Minnesota

1. *Introduction: “This card gives me hope”*

IN RECENT YEARS, public and school libraries across the United States have experienced an unprecedented wave of book challenges and bans. Censorship attempts—largely driven by a minority of vocal and well-networked individuals and groups—have become increasingly effective.

Whether censorship takes root in the anti-democratic strategies of local groups, or is codified in state legislation, the results are the same: an erosion of First Amendment protections, criminalization of educators and librarians, and an empowering of a vocal minority’s narrow vision of what books can and cannot be read and whose stories should or should not be told. While studies show that the majority of the American public opposes book banning and censorship, documented instances of the number of challenged and banned titles in school and public libraries only continues to grow.

More difficult to capture in numbers is the impact of these restrictions on young readers. Teens and young adults nationwide are facing an extraordinary challenge to their freedom to read and to engage with knowledge, ideas, and stories that mirror their own experiences and expand their understanding of the world. It is the young people who identify with these stories who are at risk of getting hurt, marginalized, or pushed out of their communities. Their stories are found within this report.

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. 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. Through December 2023, these libraries have distributed over 12,750 cards to young adult readers in every single U.S. state, D.C., Guam and Puerto Rico. Collectively, Books Unbanned cardholders from these two library systems have checked out over 286,000 books.

Both libraries have been flooded with thousands of testimonials from young people across the country who have signed up for the program, openly sharing their experiences with censorship and other barriers to accessing books and libraries, along with their desire to exercise their right to choose what they read. These stories provide unique insight into the true scope and scale of censorship attempts impacting teen and young adult readers. Cardholders have also shared how attacks on the freedom to read overlap with other significant barriers to access, such as disability, distance from a library system or lack of access to a robust digital collection.

Most importantly, these stories offer an opportunity to go beyond reported data and news media coverage to hear directly from those most affected: young readers caught in the middle of an escalating culture war. As they share the joy and escape they find in reading widely, Books Unbanned readers remind us of why the freedom to read matters in the first place. Their stories are both troubling and inspiring.

2. Overall findings

- **Books Unbanned cardholders are against censorship and they value having the freedom to read.** Censorship is strengthening their curiosity—with many seeking out banned titles to know what’s being kept from them.
- **The hidden forms of censorship faced by young people are far more difficult to report on** but are intensified by the increasing atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and inflammatory rhetoric.
- **Many young readers can’t afford to buy all the books they want or need to keep up with their reading habits, interests, and educational requirements.** Some face additional affordability barriers: their local library charges prohibitive membership fees or they have outstanding late fees that lock them out of borrowing.
- **Some don’t have access to a library at all.** Multiple cardholders indicated that there is no library in their community, or that libraries are too far away and they lack transportation options, or libraries are temporarily or permanently closed or operate with limited hours. **Some are ineligible for a library card** due to not meeting residency requirements or lacking proper identification.
- **Readers with disabilities face significant challenges accessing books,** encountering difficulties in reaching their physical library branch and finding limited options in the accessible formats they need.
- **The library collections they do have access to are often limited.** Some cardholders noted that their local library is underfunded, with a small collection that doesn’t meet their needs. In some cases, they noted that community values and bias limit the diversity of titles and make certain subject matter inaccessible.
- **The inability to access representative materials,** especially for LGBTQIA+ (*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual*) and BIPOC (*Black, Indigenous, People of Color*) cardholders, **can exacerbate feelings of isolation and the sense that their identities are under attack.**
- For many young people, **digital access to books is essential to the ability to read freely.** The privacy afforded from online reading is particularly crucial for LGBTQIA+ cardholders who are not out to their family or community.
- **Books Unbanned has had a tangible impact in providing access to young people without other options.** Cardholders renewing after one year said they are reading more and doing unwanted habits less, nurtured by their newfound access to books. Their stories demonstrate that **Books Unbanned is supporting a new generation of readers.**

3. Methodology

THIS REPORT SHARES key findings and themes drawn from a sample of 855 testimonials from Books Unbanned cardholders, out of the thousands collected by BPL and SPL from April 2022 to December 2023. Out of the sample, 647 testimonials were provided to either BPL or SPL during the sign-up process, with applicants sharing why they were signing up for the card. The remaining 208 of these testimonials were provided to BPL by cardholders during the process of renewing their Books Unbanned card after one year, answering the question of how they had benefited from the program.

A team of library school students from the University of Washington Information School performed the work of tagging and analyzing this collection of stories. The students conducted qualitative analysis through an informal review when standardizing the dataset, followed by a close thematic analysis of the selected sample. By closely reviewing the data, the students identified common patterns and themes, developing and applying codes based on observed patterns. Students coded the sample stories with a set of 134 unique tags and 17 overarching categories (*see Appendix A*).

CARDHOLDERS BY AGE

13–18



19–21

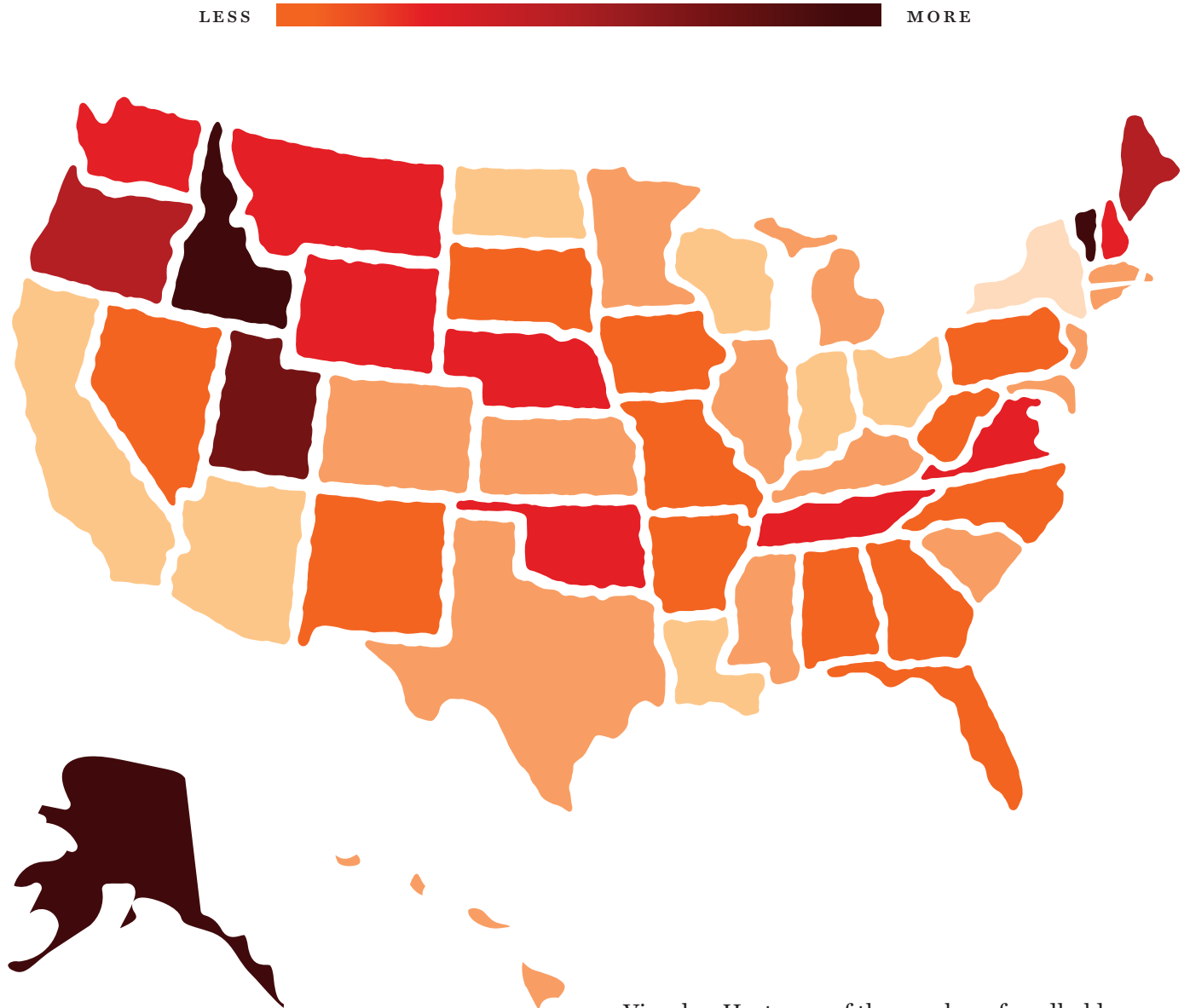


22–26



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

MAPPING THE REQUESTS



Visual 2: Heat map of the number of cardholders per 100k people in each state

- “ I don’t have access to many books very easily because I live in a small town and I don't have the money to buy every book I want to read. It has helped me read more...” —Age 17, Utah
- “ I identify as queer. I feel like the bans and culture surrounding LGBT+ stuff is isolating... I really like reading but want to read about people like me finally.” —Age 14, Ohio
- “ 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
- “ The library closest to me is very underfunded, and it is very conservative. It has a plethora of Christian novels, but their novels surrounding people of color and [other] religions is very limited. As a person of color, it sucks to not be able to see myself in novels I read.”
—Age 17, Texas
- “ There are books that I cannot take home because they would put me in danger. Reading digitally allows me to keep myself safe but still give[s] me the ability to read freely.” —Age 19, Virginia

“ 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

“ If it hadn't been for the books available to me about different marginalized people's perspectives in my school libraries growing up, I might have grown up to be a very different person.”
—Age 16, California

“ [This card] has allowed me to read and listen to books that I would have otherwise not had access to because the library in the rural county where I live has a much smaller collection.” —Age 18, Georgia

“ In my school, there's really limited access to books addressing topics that the administrators deem controversial. I was trying to do research for a project last semester about inequality in the United States due to things like sexuality and gender, and I could find almost nothing in my school library that would help.” —Age 15, Illinois

“ 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

“ 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

“ I’m Latinx and Queer and it’s really important to me to have accessible content that speaks to me. I believe in freedom, and there is no freedom in censorship.” —Age 21, Utah

“ I don’t know how to drive. Having access to online e-books is one of the few ways I can still feel connected to the world.” —Age 20, Texas

“ As a student, I struggle to afford to purchase my own books. With my Brooklyn Public Library card, I have been able to read over thirty books (and counting!) that I never would have had access to otherwise.” —Age 18, Ohio

“ I always relied heavily on libraries for reading material, especially for finding trans and LGBT information and seeing characters like me when no one in my small, conservative town could openly talk about such things. This card gives me hope.”

—Age 22, North Carolina

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

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.

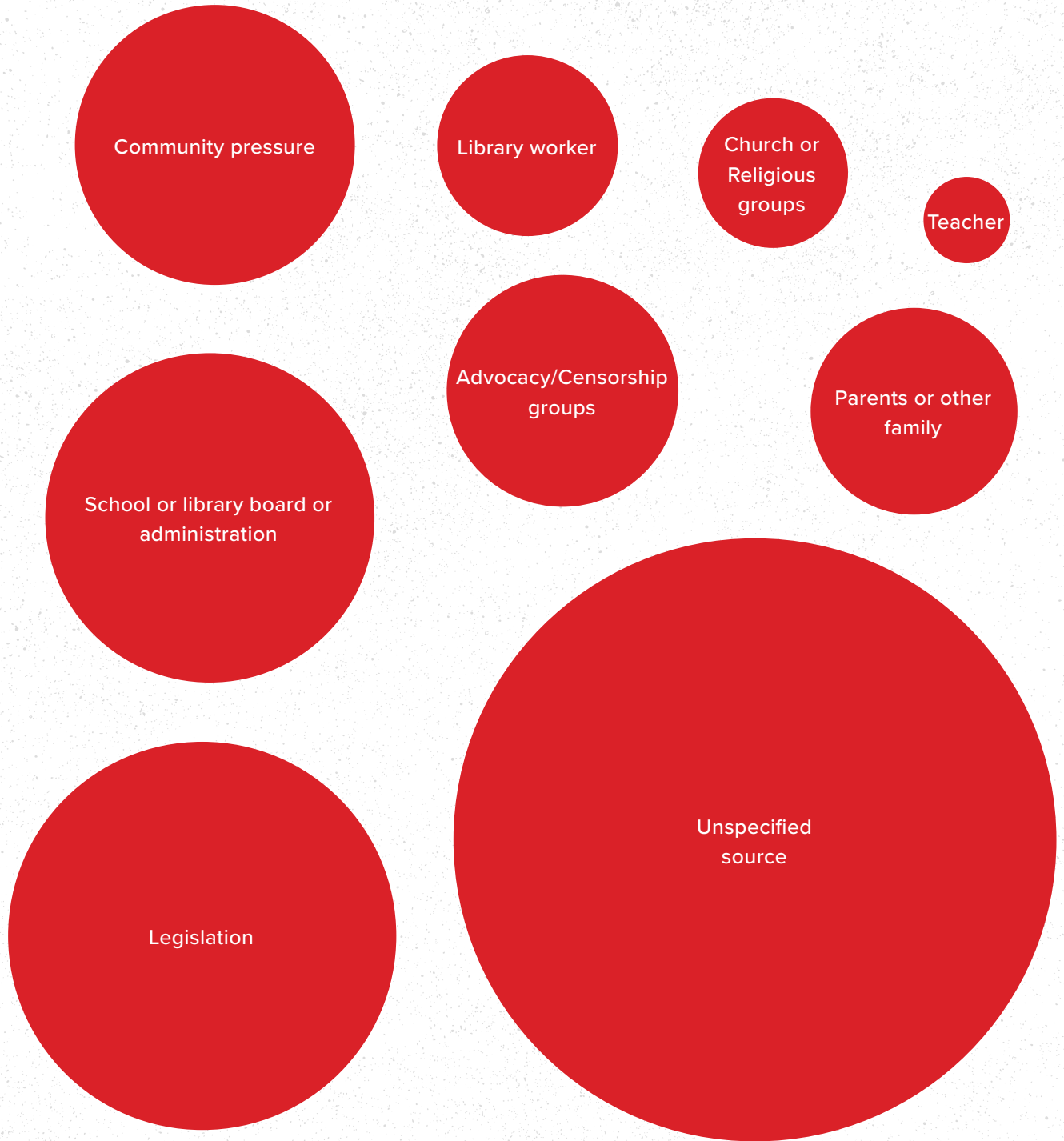
Age restrictions/ parental permission for check-out

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

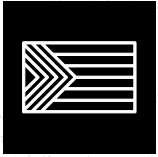
Taking books out of the online catalog or placing behind a desk so they must be requested from staff

ORIGINS OF CENSORSHIP CITED BY CARDHOLDERS



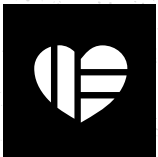
TARGETED CONTENT

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.



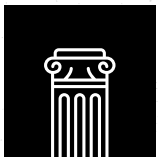
RACIAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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.



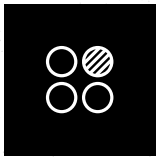
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND SEXUALITY

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



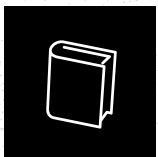
HISTORICAL TOPICS

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 school library has been entirely cleared out and locked in a closet, and the only public libraries nearby are outright removing every piece of LGBT... media [they] possibly can. I just want to read.”
—Age 15, Ohio
- “ [My state’s] ‘divisive concepts’ law [has] forced many public school history teachers to censor their teaching for fear of being reported by parents...” —Age 23, New Hampshire
- “ Idaho has implemented a book ban against any books ‘deemed inappropriate for minors.’ The books banned are those such as *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Hunger Games*. There is a reason the young adult section exists and it’s so young children who cannot handle it don’t read it. But I don’t see why 16-year-olds can’t have some freedom.” —Age 16, Idaho
- “ One time I was getting a book and the librarian was commenting that it was not appropriate for me to read. Now it is even worse, not only in the books we can get, but the librarians feel free to comment on what you are checking out.” —Age 15, Kentucky
- “ Applying [for this card] for my gender queer partner living with his deeply bigoted parents, who do their best to limit access to anything that doesn’t fit their desired lifestyle for him...” —Age 17, North Carolina

- “ I have seen parents and other groups strongly advocating against many books that give important representation and perspectives. Some influential books in my life have since been banned in my school district.” —Age 17, Utah
- “ As I went through four years of high school, I witnessed the destruction of our library. We went from a small, but full library, only halved every year until ultimately it was removed due to ‘lack of interest.’ Not only did I lose a vital educational source, but a place of comfort.” —Age 17, Kansas
- “ My local library has experienced numerous challenges and complaints. This is compounded by the restrictions put on public education in Arkansas, including a banning of [critical race theory], the Learns Act that led to money being pulled from public schools, and the Given Names Act which has suppressed student expression.”
—Age 18, Arkansas
- “ [We] were reading *Melissa* in class and my teacher said we had to stop because some parents were unhappy... but I didn’t think that was fair...I live in the south and a lot of teachers are scared about giving us books that might get them in trouble.” —Age 13, North Carolina

“ The local library is beyond wonderful but they face lots of issues surrounding removing books from shelves and banning books, which is absolutely devastating and exhausting to our librarians. Sometimes they do sadly have to retreat and give in to a bit of censorship.”

—Age 17, North Carolina

“ 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

“ [My child] has been trying to read *Gender Queer*, and was denied at their Scholastic book fair on multiple occasions, by different people.”

—Parent of age 13, Tennessee

“ As a queer teen, I deeply want to consume media about people similar to me without being afraid of my parents seeing a physical book. Having access to the BPL eLibrary will help me greatly.”

—Age 15, California

“ Our teachers are currently scanning all of the books in their classroom libraries so that they can be monitored for banned books, and parents will be given access to the lists and able to tell a teacher to pull any book at any time for any reason.” —Age 15, Florida

“ Because of the political climate of this area, even large public libraries have limited amounts of material regarding these subjects, and our school has next to nothing.” —Age 14, Arkansas

“ One of my teachers was teaching *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and a student reported to administration that a teacher was trying to make her feel bad about being white and straight. This was because we had talked about the differences in American and Middle Eastern culture. She was everyone’s favorite English teacher but ended up quitting because of this. Now the parents in my district are trying to get every book that is ‘political indoctrination’ out of our school library.”
—Age 17, North Carolina

“ Recently, a newly appointed library board in my state fired a library director of 20 years. They did this because she wouldn’t remove books that they deemed ‘inappropriate.’ They are targeting books that discuss LGBTQ+ topics primarily, but this is only the beginning.”
—Age 21, Wyoming

5. *Barriers to Access:* *“I don’t have a way to get there”*

WHILE BOOK BANS, challenges, and other forms of censorship are notable in their scale and impact, Books Unbanned cardholders face many other barriers to accessing books. In the testimonials analyzed for this report, hundreds of Books Unbanned cardholders shared their struggles to find affordable books that reflected their experiences and expanded their world.

Cardholders overwhelmingly expressed the desire to simply access a reasonable amount of materials targeted towards their age, identity and/or demographic. Several cited a partial or complete lack of access to a school library, or challenges in visiting a public library. A number of youth shared disability-related challenges in visiting their local library branch. Others with a learning disability or chronic illness reported a need for accessible formats, such as eBooks and eAudiobooks, in order to read at all.

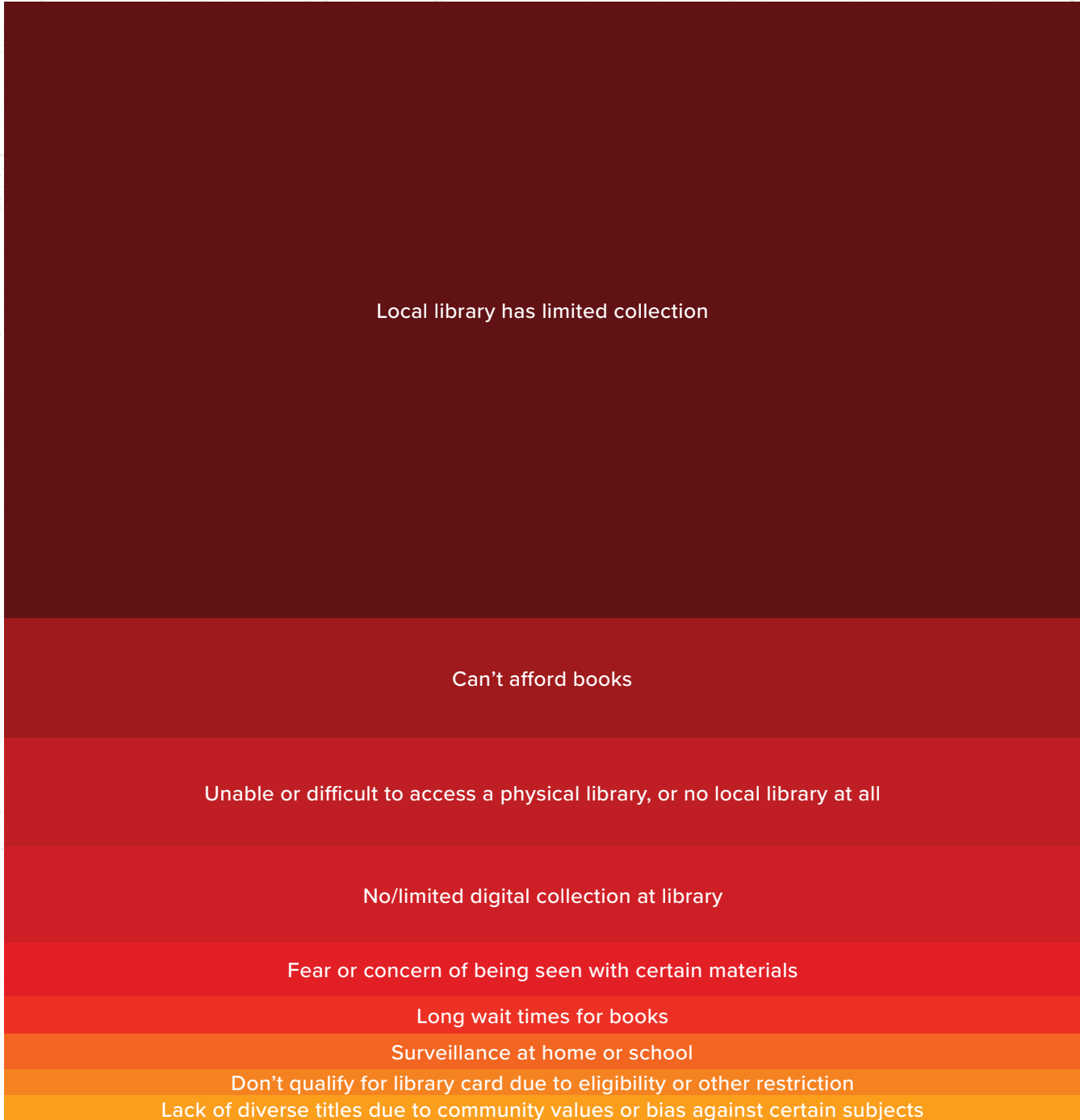
Some cardholders reported that they weren’t eligible for a public library card because they didn’t meet residency requirements or lacked proper identification. Others cited underfunded libraries with limited collections that didn’t meet their unique interests and needs. Frequently, cardholders shared that they couldn’t afford to buy the books they wanted or needed to meet educational requirements, much less keep up with their reading interests.

Overall, these testimonials reveal the extent to which barriers to access build upon and reinforce one another. Young people face a number of barriers simultaneously, often creating insurmountable obstacles to their ability to read, and read freely.

“ I am severely dyslexic and listen to books [to] ‘read with my ears’ as my mom likes to say, constantly. Audio versions are not always available like a regular book at my local library.” —Age 13, Louisiana

“ I live in a rural community and the only library we have in our area is my school. The library is closed during summer, so I was hoping to use your services then.”
—Age 15, Illinois

ACCESS BARRIERS REPORTED BY CARDHOLDERS



Also cited: Library closed temporarily or permanently, Library charges membership fee, Library funding cuts, Library has limited hours, or otherwise is difficult to access during operating hours, Excessive fines limit use of library

ACCESS BARRIERS RELATED TO LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES
OR IDENTITY

MANY CARDHOLDERS reported access challenges related to their identity or life circumstances.

Rural resident
with limited or no
access to local
libraries, or lives
too far away to
access

Person with
disability who
needs digital
access for
accessibility
reasons

Homeschooled
with no access to a
school library

Low-income
families and
individuals with no
additional funds to
afford books

Hospitalized
or under other
institutional
confinement or
care

LGBTQIA+ and
afraid to out
themselves if seen
with certain books

Unhoused or
unstable housing
and rely on
libraries for
access and/or no
permanent address
to qualify for card

Military family with
inconsistent access
to libraries

- “ My mom is disabled and can't always drive me to the library whenever I want, we also don't have any extra money to buy books I want to read.” —Age 17, Wisconsin
- “ 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
- “ I'm a queer trans man who can't pay off the fines of my local library card from back when I was a kid, and I'd really love being able to read these.” —Age 19, Pennsylvania
- “ Buying books is a luxury and the library is my heaven.”
—Age 13, Virginia
- “ My school has removed all books from the school library and told us we can use the county library but I don't have a way to get there.”
—Age 13, Florida
- “ In my location... there is zero access to public libraries at all. The only one there was closed down almost 7 years ago.”
—Age 17, Puerto Rico

- “ I can’t access my local public library due to transportation issues and being unable to provide the necessary ID and paperwork to get a library card. I never want to stop reading and learning so I wanted to get a library card so I can continue on loving books :)”
—Age 17, California
- “ My family is low income, and I can’t afford to buy/rent all of the books I would want to read. I love reading, but I am not able to do it as much as I would like because I have to think ‘Would it be better if I used my money to buy something else?’” —Age 16, Illinois
- “ My local library is severely underfunded and the city library will not allow me to apply for a free card because I am technically outside city limits.” —Age 20, Tennessee
- “ For middle school my family moved to a big city where I had seemingly endless resources to explore my creativity and knowledge. The library became my second home and I blazed through hundreds of books. Then my family moved back to our tiny hometown. Suddenly my easy access to all of these things that so heavily inspired me evaporated and I was left with a one-room library with a corner dedicated to my age group.” —Age 14, California

“ I’ve been wanting to read more, but I’m chronically ill and don’t always have the energy to go to the library or the money to buy books. Being able to read eBooks will be super helpful.” —Age 20, Texas

“ I’m disabled and can’t work, so buying books is quite difficult for me, not to [mention] that getting to physical libraries is a major challenge. Books let me rest when my body is shutting down.”
—Age 22, Virginia

“ I’m disabled, so leaving my home to pick up physical books is not always accessible for me if they have what I am looking for available.”
—Age 21, Alabama

“ I am a first-generation low-income student who cannot afford expensive books that are required for my college education.”
—Age 19, Minnesota

“ As someone who volunteers with teens and children, [this card] gives me the ability to have more insightful conversations with young people about these books as they become popular due to being challenged and removed.” —Age 22, Virginia

6. *Impact:*

“This card has saved my mental health”

CONFRONTED WITH significant restrictions on their freedom to read due to the combined pressures of censorship and other barriers to access, young people sharing their stories highlighted the profound impact on their sense of safety, belonging, and ability to fully engage with the world, their education, and their own identities.

Books Unbanned cardholders shared that they generally want access to the kinds of books they are interested in. Many are looking for particular texts or authors that they are unable to access at their own libraries. The inability to access representative materials, especially for LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC cardholders, or the fear of being discovered reading those materials, exacerbated feelings of isolation and the sense that their identities are under attack.

For many, digital access is not just a matter of preference, but essential to their ability to read freely. LGBTQIA+ cardholders who have not come out to their family or community need the privacy digital access provides, and those with disabilities require digital materials for accessibility reasons. Their stories speak to the impact of being denied this access.

Some cardholders expressed curiosity about books being targeted for bans and restrictions, but a great deal more shared a general desire to use reading as a way to explore a range of topics that they feel will help them grow.

Cardholders renewing their Books Unbanned card from BPL (SPL’s Books Unbanned card will begin renewing in late April 2024) also shared the impact of the freedom to explore themselves and the world through books, demonstrating that Books Unbanned is nurturing a new generation of readers.

“Having this library card helped open many options for me as it granted me access to a vast repository of knowledge and resources, which allowed me to continuously expand my horizons, learn new things, and stay informed.” —Age 16, California

“[This card] has allowed me to read and listen to books that I would have otherwise not had access to. Books allow me to change and shape my perspective and worldview and the books I have read with my BPL eCard have certainly impacted me.”
—Age 18, Georgia

REASONS FOR WANTING A BOOKS UNBANNED CARD

BOOKS UNBANNED CARDHOLDERS shared a wide range of reasons for their need for access, including the desire to protect their freedom to choose what they read.

■ **Just want access to more books!**

Cardholders commented they were experiencing limited collections and wanted access to the books they are interested in.

■ **Avid readers / Expressed love of reading:**

Cardholders shared their love of reading for learning, for entertainment or as an escape from their everyday lives.

■ **Seeking out banned books specifically:**

Cardholders expressed curiosity about the books that are being challenged and wanted to learn more about them.

■ **To support the Books Unbanned program and libraries:** Supporting programs that protect others' freedom to read (as well as their own) is important to them.

■ **They want more representative materials:**

Cardholders said that accessing diverse subjects, perspectives, etc., was important to them, as well as the need to be able to see aspects of themselves or their lives in what they are reading.

■ **To combat censorship:**

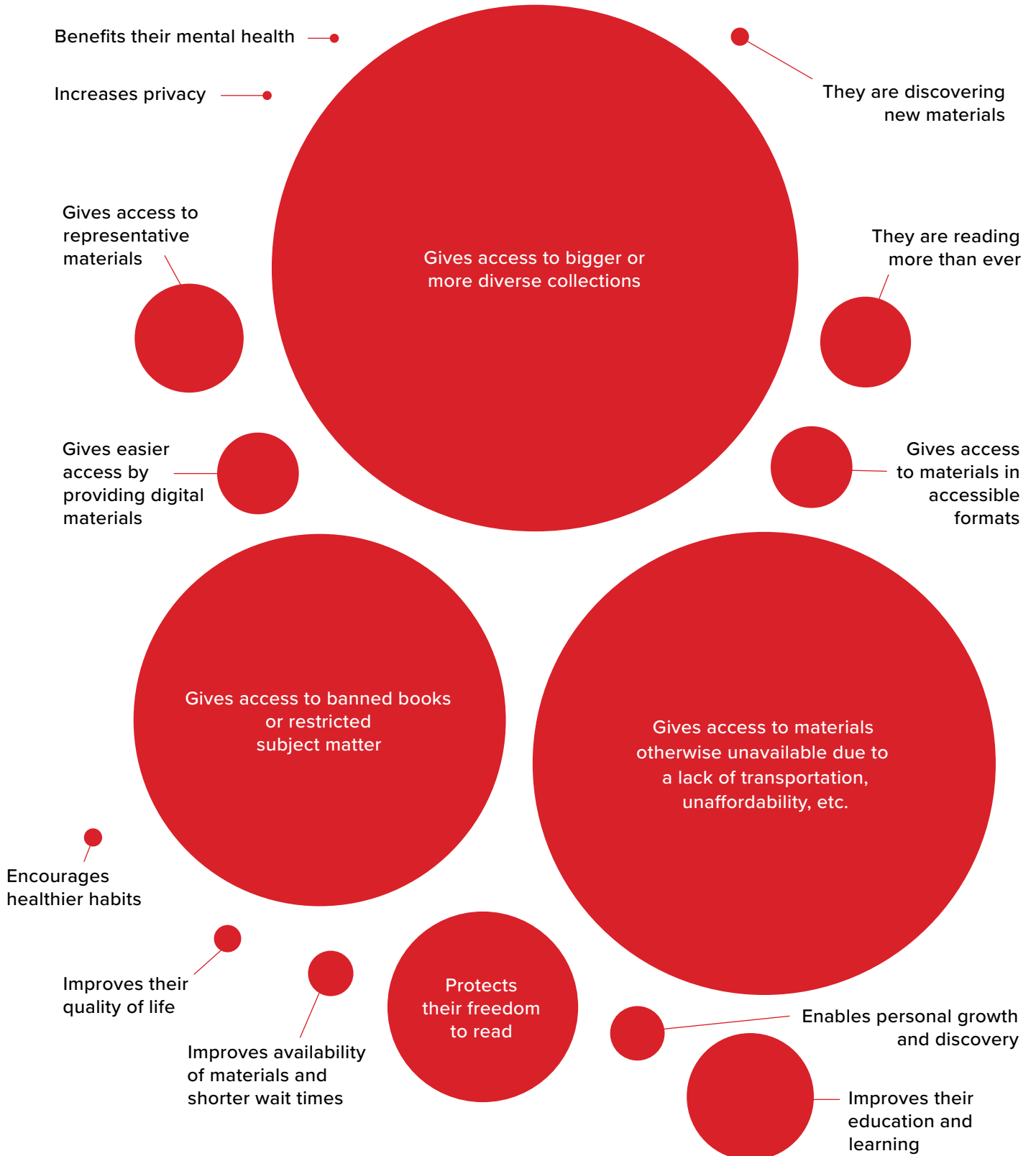
Censorship is something that young people are experiencing and they are passionate about protecting their freedoms.

■ **To research subjects of interest, for self-improvement or self-education:**

Cardholders mentioned the desire to learn and improve their access to topics that they feel will help them grow.

■ **To educate others:** Many cardholders, including current and future educators, book club members, parents of teen readers and general library supporters expressed the desire to educate others by being able to access banned and targeted books.

REASONS FOR RENEWING BOOKS UNBANNED CARD



- “ I LOVE reading books. I think reading everything and anything really opens up my views of the world and makes me a better human, citizen, etc.” —Age 24, California
- “ [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
- “ I have read 44 books this year, most of them through this library. It has gotten me back into reading.” —Age 19, Indiana
- “ I myself am queer. I’d like to read LGBTQI+ books but am too scared to check them out from my school library, if they have any, because I don’t want anyone to find out.” —Age 16, Idaho
- “ I use it to anonymously access books and information sometimes controversial in my community.” —Age 19, Texas
- “ I have LOVED my BPL eCard! It has saved my life with getting my hands on queer books. Not only is the database much larger than my local county system, but [it] has a much higher percentage of queer, BIPOC, and banned books! I have been able to read more queer and banned books than ever with my BPL eCard. Running my local queer book club has been so much easier with it.” —Age 20, Utah

- “ This card is so awesome and important to me. I live in an area where they are banning books about LGBTQIA+ people and race theory... essentially anything that broadens our minds and helps us learn more about and empathize with other human beings.” —Age 14, Florida
- “ I’m disabled, and books help me see the world when getting out into it is hard.” —Age 17, Maryland
- “ This card has saved my mental health. I can read what I want to and not have to scour the internet for it. I don’t have to worry about saving money to buy the books I want to read. Thank you so much.” —Age 17, Kansas
- “ I have been using my card. It’s important to me because I don’t know how to drive. Having access to online eBooks is one of the few ways I can still feel connected to the world. One of the few ways I can continue learning and educating myself about people that are different from myself.” —Age 20, Texas
- “ I live in Florida where the state government is banning many books that should be allowed to be read by students. I even saw this firsthand happen in my school when all my teachers had to get rid of a bunch of books. I am thankful for this opportunity to be able to read the books I want without any restrictions.” —Age 15, Florida

- “ I have never had access to such a wide variety of audiobooks, this means the world to me.” —Age 15, Illinois
- “ Having this library card helped open many options for me as it granted me access to a vast repository of knowledge and resources, which allowed me to continuously expand my horizons, learn new things, and stay informed. Having a library card was a cost-effective way to enjoy reading and learning without the financial burden of purchasing books or resources.” —Age 16, California
- “ Since my town doesn’t have a library, my BPL card is the only way that I have access to books. Since I moved to this town, my love of reading almost dwindled since I couldn’t access books I hadn’t read before, but my BPL card saved that love.” —Age 16, Utah
- “ I have been reading more than I ever have in my life since I got this card. Thank you.” —Age 13, North Carolina

7. Conclusion

THIS REPORT is only the beginning of what we can learn from the young people reaching out to Books Unbanned libraries. Their words capture a vital perspective during an alarming moment in the struggle for intellectual freedom, with more stories arriving every day.

While many of these readers describe feelings of isolation and hopelessness, a great many express the hope and joy that having access to books and information provides.

The lifelong benefits of reading are well-documented. Reading of any kind, including reading for leisure and pleasure, has been linked with not only a boost in academic achievement,

but also an increase in empathy, improvement in general well-being and resilience to stress and other difficult emotions. What's more, young people read more and enjoy themselves more when they can choose what they read. Stifling access to books and the freedom to read has far-reaching consequences when the myriad of benefits are considered.

With cardholders in all 50 states, as well as Puerto Rico, Guam and Washington, D.C., the Books Unbanned program has had an extensive reach. But across diverse regions and communities, cardholders' stories echo many of the same themes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Young people want **access to stories that reflect their own experiences and expand their knowledge of others** with backgrounds different from their own.
- Visible forms of censorship and associated rhetoric **create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that lead to less visible forms of censorship.**
- Restrictions caused by censorship **exacerbate already existing barriers to access.**
- **Numerous young people face a number of access barriers simultaneously.** A student unable to afford the books they need will depend on libraries for access, but if unable to access the library in person, may rely on meager digital collections that the library cannot afford to expand.
- **Creating access leads to demand.** Having expanded and easy access to the types of books they want to read enables young people to deepen their love of reading, develop their sense of self and belonging, and nurture budding interests.

8. *Call to Action*

THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE found here communicate authentic, compelling, and urgent narratives on why the freedom to read is essential to the health of our communities and our democracy. The rising numbers of book bans and challenges serve as a clear warning sign of what we stand to lose if censorship is left unchallenged. The voices of these young readers are showing us what has already been lost. They are speaking out to sound the alarm, to ask for our help. Now is the time to listen, to speak out, and to take action with equal urgency, purpose, and courage.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Apply for a library card at your local library and encourage your friends to do the same.

PARENTS

Support your children's reading based on their interests, leverage the knowledge of librarians to help you find age-appropriate materials about difficult topics, and actively support your local school and public libraries.

LIBRARY WORKERS

Defend intellectual freedom, encourage patrons to read and learn in order to come to their own conclusions, feature a variety of perspectives in book displays, host reading groups and community conversations, and advertise access to digital materials.

SUPPORTERS

Donate to the Books Unbanned program (booksunbanned.com) and to your local school and public libraries.

VENDORS / PUBLISHERS

Support access to books through libraries—it encourages a love of reading and develops new generations of readers.

GENERAL PUBLIC

Support your local libraries. Vote in favor of levies and funding that support libraries and educational opportunities for youth in your community, push back against attempts to restrict access to books, and advocate for a strong school library in your community.

9. *About This Report*

THE FOLLOWING TEAMS were instrumental in establishing the Books Unbanned program, gathering and analyzing data, and the publication of this report.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Brooklyn Public Library is one of the nation's largest library systems and among New York City's most democratic institutions. As a leader in developing modern 21st century libraries, we provide resources to support personal advancement, foster civic literacy, and strengthen the fabric of community among the more than 2.7 million individuals who call Brooklyn home. We provide nearly 60,000 free programs a year with writers, thinkers, artists, and educators—from around the corner and around the world. And we give patrons millions of opportunities to enjoy one of life's greatest satisfactions: the joy of a good book. Visit us online at bklynlibrary.org.

THE SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY

From its beginning in 1891 as a single reading room in the Pioneer Square neighborhood, to now a world-class library system with 27 locations, The Seattle Public Library has been dedicated to fostering a love of reading and supporting intellectual freedom around the globe. Learn more about us, our contributions to the city and how you can support our work at spl.org.

BOOKS UNBANNED

Since its launch in April 2022, Books Unbanned has garnered extensive national and local press coverage and contributed an important counter narrative against the loud and provocative voices demanding that books be pulled from classrooms and library shelves. To date five libraries are part of the Books Unbanned coalition: Brooklyn Public Library, The Seattle Public Library, Boston Public Library, San Diego Public Library, and LA County Public Library. Books Unbanned continues to stand for the principle of intellectual freedom and the critical role that the freedom to read plays in libraries and a democratic society.

This initiative is privately funded through the coordinated efforts of the Brooklyn Public Library Development Department, The Seattle Public Library Foundation, private support from partnering libraries, and with donations from readers like you. Learn more at www.booksunbanned.com

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“ The freedom to read is very important to me. I want to be able to read whatever I want and to form my own opinions on things, and it’s harder to do that when books are banned. Libraries are a vital part of our society as they encourage young readers to dive into books and learn from them. It isn’t usually possible to buy all the books you want to read so libraries give readers so many options of books to read as well as the ability to discover new books. Libraries truly help shape young minds and develop our society, and they are a vital part of our community.” —Age 19, Texas

“ Libraries were and are very important places to me, almost like a sacred ground for information—I still remember obsessively reading outside the library (because snacks were not allowed in there) at lunch in middle school. So seeing so many books/audiobooks be open for free, fiction or non-fiction, makes my inner middle-school self kind of giddy. Adding to that, there are some books I’d wanna access that my local libraries often don’t have, so having a digital version would be very nice. In my opinion, the freedom to read is directly correlated with the freedom to think, and should never be denied anybody.” —Age 18, California

- “ Libraries fed my childhood... The freedom to read means everything to me, because it has shaped me as an individual. The freedom to read taught me to think freely.” —Age 20, Idaho
- “ The banning of books is unethical and deliberate in order to try and gain control. Being able to access these banned books and other [sic] books is essential to my and everyone’s freedom, knowledge, and joy. I love reading and cannot access many things because of the state I live in. Thank you for having this. Thank you libraries for existing. [I]t's the best thing we have in our society by far.” —Age 24, Arizona
- “ I am studying to become a librarian. As such I want to read as many books, especially banned books, as I can. Knowledge is community, community is freedom!” —Age 22, Indiana

Appendix A

CATEGORY	TAG	CATEGORY	TAG
Story Source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application • Instagram • Email 	Disability Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADHD • Unspecified disability • Neurodivergent or neuroatypical unspecified • Autism spectrum disorder • Physical disability • Learning disability • Dyslexia • Blind or low vision • Mental health condition
Applicant <i>Is the cardholder applying for themselves or a teen in their life?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent • Teacher • Public Librarian • School Librarian • Sibling • Grandparent • Aunt/Uncle • Neighbor • Self • Partner/spouse 	Geography <i>How does the cardholder describe where they live?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural / Small town • Urban • Suburban • Religious or Conservative community
Referral <i>How did the cardholder or adult with a teen hear about Books Unbanned?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent • Teacher • Public Librarian • School Librarian • Partner/spouse • Sibling • Grandparent • Aunt/Uncle • Neighbor • Self • Youth Pastor • Friend • Social media • Instagram • TikTok • Library website • Article • News story 	Access <i>Access issues described by the cardholder</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable or difficult to access physical library • Limited library hours or can't access during operating hours • Fines • Unable to get library card due to eligibility or other restriction • No or limited digital collection at the library • Fear or concern being seen with certain materials • Limited library collection • Surveillance at home or school • Can't afford books • Library charges membership fees • Long wait times • Library closed temporarily or permanently • Library funding cuts • Hospitalized or under other institutional confinement or care • Biased collections / curriculum
Format or Materials Type Preference/Need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiobook • eBook • Educational Textbooks • School materials • General digital format • Accessible format • Preferred language materials 	Race / Ethnicity <i>Cardholder's race; self-reported</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black • Latinx • MENASWA • AAPI • Mixed race • Indigenous / tribal affiliation • Unspecified POC or BIPOC

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

CATEGORY	TAG	CATEGORY	TAG
Gender / Sexual Identity <i>Cardholder's gender or sexual/romantic orientation; self-reported</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queer • Agender • Nonbinary • Cis • Trans • LGBTQ+ unspecified • Genderqueer • Asexual/Ace • Aromantic/aro • Gay • Lesbian • Straight • Pansexual • Bisexual 	Miscellaneous Additional Cardholder Information <i>Reported by cardholder</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeschooled • Military Family • Low income • Unhoused/unstable housing • Not out/closeted
Challenged/Restricted/ Banned Title/Author <i>Reported by cardholder</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EX. <i>Front Desk</i> by Kelly Yang [FREE TEXT FIELD] 	Misc Reasons Given for Wanting Books Unbanned Card	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avid reader / love of reading • Interested in banned books generally • Want access to more books generally • More representative materials • Research subject of interest • Combat censorship • Want to support Books Unbanned program • Educate others
Challenged/Restricted/ Banned Topic/Subject <i>Reported by cardholder</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EX. Black Literature [FREE TEXT FIELD] 	Impact of Books Unbanned Card <i>Specifically for renewals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to materials otherwise unavailable/inaccessible for unspecified reason • Access to materials otherwise unavailable/inaccessible due to affordability • Access to banned books / restricted subject matter • Improved availability of materials / shorter wait times • Access to materials in accessible formats • Access to bigger / more diverse collection • Access to representative materials • Digital format enables easier access • Discovering new materials • Able to protect privacy • Reading more • Healthier habits • Personal growth or discovery • Mental health benefits • Improved quality of life • Education / Learning • Freedom to read / Feel more freedom
Censorship type <i>Reported by cardholder</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge • Ban • Unspecified censorship • Self-censorship by school or library • Individual censorship / restriction • Age restriction • Fear / threat of future censorship 		
Origin of Censorship or Challenge or Restriction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislation • Community pressure • Advocacy group • School / Library board or administration • Church / Religious group • Parent(s) or other family members • Teacher • Librarian / Library worker • Unknown / Unspecified 		
		Notable story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes

“ 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