



# Library Board Report

**To:** Chair and Members of the Bruce County Public Library Board

**From:** Brooke McLean, Director and CEO

**Date:** March 19, 2025

**Re:** Intellectual Freedom Trends

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## Purpose:

This report is for information.

## Report Summary:

This report provides the Library Board with information about recent trends in intellectual freedom challenges in Canada and the United States.

## Background:

A core value of libraries, intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction (American Library Association). As a cornerstone of democracy, intellectual freedom is enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As democratic public institutions, libraries play an important role in upholding intellectual freedom. Challenges to reading materials have grown over the last five years, with an increasing focus on materials by or about LGBTQ2S+ and racialized communities. According to data from the [Canadian Library Challenges Database](#), between 2022 and 2023 the number of reported challenges doubled. The most cited reasons for a challenge were pro-2SLGBTQI+ content, racism, violence, or political views. BCPL received one formal challenge last year for a graphic novel that was perceived as derogatory.

The [American Library Association](#) reported a 20% increase in challenges in 2023. Challenges to books written by or about a person of colour or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community accounted for 47% of titles. Often, there was a concerted effort to censor multiple titles. Although book challenges have a long history, organized efforts to challenge multiple titles simultaneously are a newer trend.

It is important to distinguish between a book challenge and a ban. A ban occurs when a book is removed from a library's collection and access is denied to patrons. In Canada, outright bans are rare. Canadian libraries are guided by policies that prioritize intellectual freedom and often choose to retain contested materials in their collections. A challenge is an attempt to censor, remove, or restrict access to a publication so that others can't read it. Ironically, attempts to censor books often result in increased public interest in the material as readers try to understand the controversy.

Libraries are responding with initiatives to shield against the erosion of intellectual freedom. Many libraries, including BCPL, have implemented Intellectual Freedom policies and have clear procedures for individuals to challenge library materials. Libraries across Canada engage in educational events like Freedom to Read Week to celebrate the right to read freely. Other unique initiatives include:

- The Chicago Public Library declared themselves the first Book Sanctuary in 2022 and invites individuals and libraries to join them by starting their own book sanctuary. The goal is to collect and protect challenged books while making them broadly accessible. Toronto Public Library, Ottawa Public Library, and Innisfill IdeaLAB & Library, are three libraries in Ontario that have established book sanctuaries.
- Toronto Public Library launched the What's at Stake? campaign to make intellectual freedom concepts tangible and relevant. In addition to the media campaign, they host Civil Forums to have critical conversations about intellectual freedom issues.
- Brooklyn Public Library has issued more than 5,000 free electronic library cards to teens from across the United States as part of their Books UnBanned initiative, enabling them to access digital titles of books that have been banned in some states.

Providing access to diverse viewpoints, supporting lifelong learning, and upholding core library values is essential work for libraries.

#### **Financial/Staffing/Legal/IT Considerations:**

There are no financial, staffing, legal or IT considerations associated with this report.

#### **Interdepartmental Consultation:**

N/A

#### **Link to Strategic Plan:**

Community Sharing Place

#### **Attachments:**

Understanding Challenges to Books and Magazines Infographic  
41 Challenged Publications  
Censorship by the Numbers