

A Confluence of Trends in Library Censorship

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of library censorship efforts differed widely between the USA and Canada. Between 2015 and 2021, Canadian libraries most commonly experienced challenges to materials perceived to be racist, while USA libraries dealt primarily with challenges to sexual content and pro-LGBTQIA+ content. However, both countries experienced a notable increase in library censorship movements in the years following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon, driven in large part by conservative reactionary groups pushing an exclusionary anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-racial justice agenda, has resulted in a precipitous rise in documented challenges to library resources in both countries. The resulting data show that both the nature of challenges and titles challenged have become strikingly similar in recent years. This study examines the data documenting library resistance in the USA and Canada to illustrate how the countries' once distinct library censorship trends have converged, putting LGBTQIA+ resources in both USA and Canadian libraries in jeopardy.

Introduction

In the years following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries in both the USA and Canada experienced a startling rise in challenges to library resources and events. In the USA, this wave of censorship efforts was primarily driven by resistance to materials concerning racism or racial equity and LGBTQIA+ issues. This should not come as a surprise, as both these themes were prevalent in book banning attempts prior to the pandemic (American Library Association, 2023). In Canada, recent censorship efforts have primarily centered on resources and events concerning LGBTQIA+ issues, in rather stark contrast to earlier censorship trends. Prior to the pandemic, Canadian libraries most commonly experienced challenges to materials perceived to be racist, and the most common title challenged in Canada prior to 2021 was singled out for its perceived transphobia (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024a). This study examines the data collected on library censorship in the USA and Canada, comparing trends in both countries through both a broad and demographic lens to evaluate how the nature of challenges has evolved between 2015 and 2023. The resulting analysis indicates that conservative activist organizations in Canada have mimicked the actions of similar USA organizations to more effectively foment resistance to intellectual freedom in libraries.

Background

Both the American Library Association (ALA) and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) have maintained efforts to collect data on library censorship for many years. Both organizations rely on voluntary reporting by library workers through the use of publicly available online forms and publish annual reports highlighting details and titles from the aggregated data. In the USA, this report comes in the form of the annual "Banned Books Field Report", in publication since 2004. Canada's first aggregated reports were published online starting in 2007 by the now-defunct Canadian Library Association, and the effort was continued by the CFLA upon its establishment in 2016 (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024c). In the ensuing years, other organizations have spearheaded their own efforts at collecting and publicly disseminating data on library censorship. In 2021, both the PEN America Index of School Book Bans and Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson's Book Censorship Database became publicly available. In 2022, the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) at Toronto Metropolitan University began the Library Challenges Database. In 2023, the CFE and CFLA partnered to merge their collection efforts into the Canadian Library Challenges Database (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024d). These multiple sources of information on the phenomenon of library censorship with their varying methodologies and foci provide opportunities for further research and analysis on the subject.

All of the organizations involved in these efforts have remarked upon the striking increase in censorship efforts in the last few years, specifically singling out the resistance to LGBTQIA+ and anti-racist resources (Nyby, 2024; American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023; Meehan & Friedman, 2023; EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). Representatives from both the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Committee have emphasized that the influence of conservative activist groups has played no small part in the unprecedented rise in anti-library activity, specifically referencing USA groups Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, and MassResistance along with Canadian groups Action4Canada, Save Canada, and Concerned Citizens Canada (American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023; Nyby, 2024). The ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom (2022) noted that in 2021, these groups began to distribute lists of objectionable resources, and in a parallel move, Canadian activist group Action4Canada began distributing materials specifically calling out a list of LGBTQIA+-positive titles curated by the SOGI 123 initiative. This list of titles was featured on a pseudo-legal "notice of personal liability" distributed by Action4Canada members to libraries and schools across the country threatening legal action against individual library workers if any of the listed titles were present within the library's collection. This notice was so widely distributed it prompted an official response from the CFLA (Intellectual Freedom Committee, 2022).

Although there was no publicly available data in mid-2022 indicating that library censorship efforts in Canada were on the rise, library workers across the country began to realize that the tide had turned. After witnessing the startling rise in library challenges and vitriolic anti-library rhetoric reported in the USA the previous year, many workers in Canadian libraries anticipated a similar movement to develop in their own country. However, few were prepared for the sudden onset and severity of challenges that arose in 2022, the largest part of which were specifically to LGBTQIA+ resources. At the time of this writing, two years have passed since the initial rise in library challenges in Canada, three years since the USA saw its large post-COVID jump. Although the rate of challenges appears to have plateaued in the USA, there is not yet any indication that the parallel Canadian movement is abating.

Literature Review

It is difficult for an academic researcher to write confidently about the state of intellectual freedom in relation to libraries because very little scholarly, data-based research exists that would inform a comprehensive analysis about the contemporary situation. Publications about intellectual freedom or censorship in relation to libraries are frequently philosophical (including ethics and values); legal (laws and court cases); descriptive of policy, as opposed to analytical; or theoretical or are isolated accounts of individual or institutional incidents. There appears to be no single scholarly source of research data about levels of access to content in libraries (Dresang, 2006, p. 171).

The relative lack of quantitative studies of challenges to books and programs in North American libraries has often been noted (Steele, 2022; Nyby, 2023; Kortora, 2000, Pinsky & Brenner, 2023), but the lack of Canadian examples has largely been passed over. In part, this absence reflects the lack of systematic collection of data, noted as early as 1995 (Schrader, 1995) and only addressed in 2007 by the Advisory Committee on Intellectual Freedom of the Canadian Library Association (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024b).

Even with the annual publication of data since 2007 (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024c) and annual descriptive reports, Canadian scholars tended to rely on longer data sets from the USA data supplied by the American Library Association (Aucoin, 2021). The present paper draws on Canadian reports from the database developed from the Canadian reports and supplemented by data from the Canadian Library Challenges Database (CLCD), a joint effort of the CFLA and the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) at Toronto Metropolitan University.

The USA data includes information on challenges in schools, largely from media accounts, (American Library Association, 2024), as well as self-reported data from public libraries, generating a literature that has an emphasis on schools and curriculum (Donelson, 1990; Donelson, 1997; Knox, 2014). However, it is not clear that the separate data streams present different pictures of the character of the totality of challenges (Narayanaswamy & Weaver, 2015).

While the Canadian data lacks strong representation from the K-12 sector, Beaudry & Samek (2023) offer a discursive account of the current pressures on Canadian schools.

Though it has been noted that quantitative studies on library censorship are rare, comparative studies on this issue between the USA and Canada are practically nonexistent. Oltmann, Samek, & Cooke (2023) discussed how Canadian, USA, and UK views on intellectual freedom and social responsibility differ and align.

It has been supposed that the USA experience has far reaching effects (Pinsky & Brenner, 2023), but no comprehensive examination of that proposition has been undertaken. On the political side, there are parallel Canadian organizations (Action4Canada is quite similar to Moms for Liberty) that use similar tactics, but despite their pervasive popularity and rate of activity throughout the country, they have not had the success of their USA counterparts in influencing policy or library collections (Ellis, 2023). Laats & Meehan (2024) describe how the actions of USA groups such as Moms for Liberty are a continuation of a well-documented history of book-banning attempts by conservative activists, which is closely associated with the tradition of resistance on the part of USA conservatives to the "transformative" nature of young adult and juvenile literature in general (Gaffney, 2017, p.53). There is not a similar history of precursors to Action4Canada.

Methodology

Because of the stark difference in nature and volume of challenges reported in Canada starting in 2022, Canadian results are often separated into two separate time periods in the analysis. Though figures from the entire 2015-2023 reference period are often presented, separate representations for the 2015-2021 and 2022-2023 subperiods are more often used. This practice is used to illustrate how trends in Canada have shifted significantly in the later reference subperiod, aligning more closely with trends from the USA. In some instances, USA data were also separated into corresponding subperiods in order to better illustrate the trend alignment.

The broad comparison of library censorship trends utilizes several data sources. All figures pertaining to library challenges in Canada between 2015-2021 are gleaned from the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey Database. This dataset included a small number of partial reports that did not include enough information to properly analyze based on the study methodology. These challenges were not included in the study. Figures pertaining to library challenges in Canada between 2022 and 2023 are gleaned from the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey Database and the Canadian Library Challenges Database jointly maintained by the CFLA and CFE. All figures related to challenges in the USA are gleaned from the ALA's Book Ban Data, maintained by the Office of Intellectual Freedom. These datasets are compilations of intellectual freedom challenges voluntarily reported by library workers between 2015 and 2023. The challenges include formal and informal challenges to library resources (books, events, programming, etc.). Formal challenges generally embody an event in which a complainant follows the library's policy for reconsideration, usually a "Request for Reconsideration" form. Informal challenges encompass a range of manifestations, including but not limited to vandalism, protests, or in-person confrontations with library workers.

For the demographic comparison, the CFLA/CFE data are compared to the analysis from the *Demographics of Book Bans* white paper (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024), which uses the dataset of book bans reported between 2021 and 2022 as provided by the Book Censorship Database (Magnusson, 2021-present). Despite the longer reference period, the Canadian dataset contains 626 records compared to 7,795 records in the USA dataset. The difference in volume is partially explained by Canada's smaller population, and partially explained by the broader criteria for inclusion in the Book Censorship Database.

The demographic analysis used for the Canadian 2015-2021 time period was originally compiled for earlier research (Nyby, 2023), though the results have been modified to include forty-nine challenges dating from 2021 that were reported to the CFLA after the study was completed. In this earlier study, the reporting libraries' postal codes were cross-referenced against 2016 Canadian census data in order to classify each library into one of three levels within five separate demographic categories. These categories were determined by various census datapoints: city size was determined by the population of the municipality in which the postal code was located; educational attainment level was determined by the percentage of residents within the postal code's aggregate dissemination area (ADA) who held a bachelor's degree or higher; income level was determined by the median household income of the postal code's ADA; age level was determined by the median age of the postal code's ADA; political representation was determined by the party affiliation of the member of parliament for the ADA's federal electoral riding. These same categories were used for demographic analysis of the Canadian 2022-2023 dataset, though several adjustments were made. First, the 2022-2023 data was cross-referenced against the 2021 Canadian census of population. Second, owing to slightly differing data fields in the Canadian Library Challenges Database, postal-code level data was no longer available.

Instead, municipality-level data were used to demographically classify each reporting library. Third, the level thresholds within each applicable demographic category were adjusted to match the 2021 census median levels. Lastly, owing to the presence of areas represented by parties not present in the earlier sample (Green Party of Canada and Bloc Québécois), two more classification levels were added to the political representation demographic category.

Limitations

As with most quantitative research into library challenges, the most prominent limitation concerns the nature and size of the sample. The ALA estimates that only between three and eighteen percent of challenges in the USA are reported (Doyle, 2017), and recent research indicates that the Canadian rate likely falls within the same range (Nyby et al., 2024). Compounding this, perceptions on what constitutes a challenge and library policies concerning challenge reporting may vary widely, leading to an overrepresentation of certain individual libraries or library systems within the sample. Given these considerations, the results should not be interpreted as definitive or conclusive findings. Rather, the trends outlined in the results are best viewed as illustrations of what is indicated by the best available data.

The provenance of the data used in the demographic comparison may act as a confounding factor. While the Canadian dataset focuses on censorship attempts in the form of challenges to resources and programs as reported by library workers, the USA dataset focuses on successful book bans in schools and libraries as reported by various media outlets (Magnusson, 2021-present). The differing natures of the data in question may belie differing motivations in censorship efforts, and may also partially explain the difference in volume between the two datasets. As such, the demographic analysis cannot be seen as a perfectly analogous comparison of effective censorship, but rather a comparison of areas within the two nations in which book banning behavior or tendencies are more likely to be present. However, it must be noted that successful bans are fairly uncommon in Canada, so it may be that this is the most valid possible comparison, given the available data.

Results

Broad Comparison

Both the USA and Canada experienced large increases in library censorship attempts in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic (American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2024; Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024; Centre for Free Expression, 2024). In the USA, the ALA collected a few hundred reported challenges each year between 2015 and 2019, but experienced a stark drop-off to only 156 reported challenges in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by a large influx of 729 reported challenges in 2021, a 75.2% increase over the previous five-year high of 416 challenges. The USA total further increased to over 1200 reported challenges in both 2022 and 2023 (fig. 1). The CFLA received between thirty-three and sixty-one challenges in the five years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced a similar dip in 2020. However, the post-pandemic rise in challenges was somewhat more gradual in Canada, with 2021 seeing seventy-eight reported challenges—a 28% rise over the previous five-year peak of sixty-one.

Total Reported Challenges, USA: 2015-2023

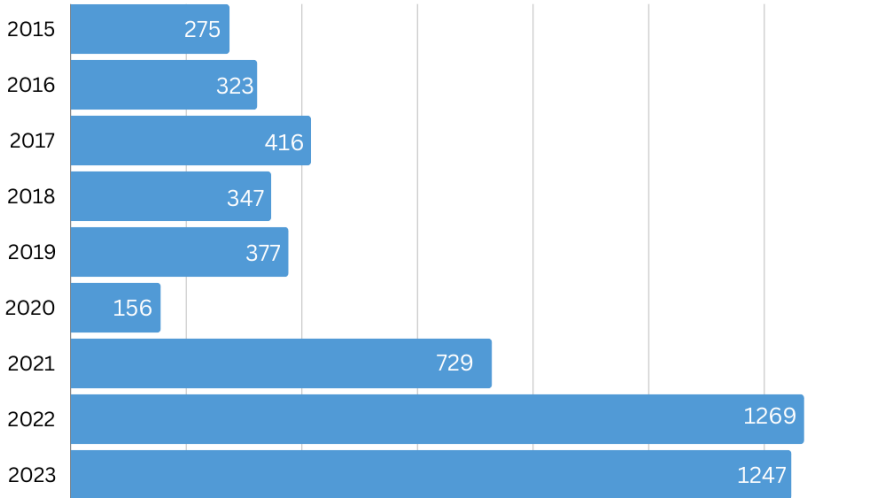


Figure 1: Total reported challenges to library resources in the USA, 2015-2023

Total Reported Challenges, Canada: 2015-2023

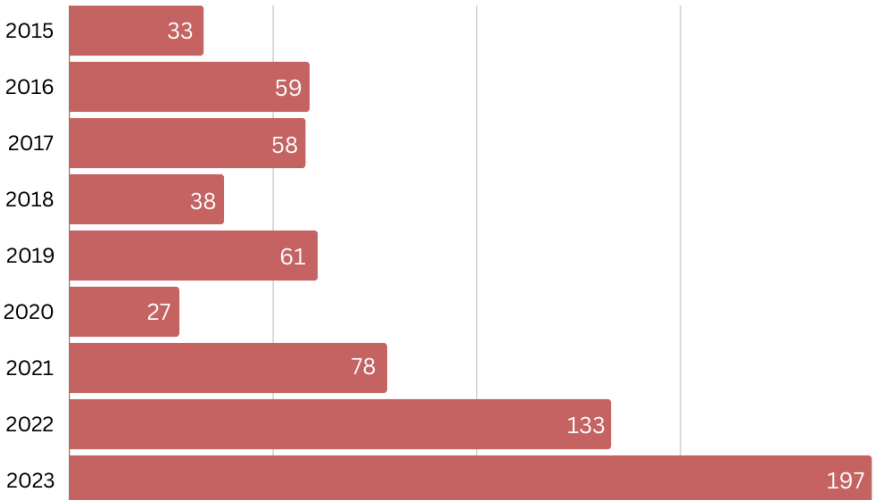


Figure 2: Total reported challenges to library resources in Canada, 2015-2023

Canada experienced a much more dramatic rise in reported challenges in 2022 and again in 2023 with 133 and 197 reports, respectively (fig. 2). These totals by themselves do not make for a perfect comparison, given the order-of-magnitude difference in raw numbers. However, they can be extrapolated out to a challenges-per-100,000-population rate which provides a much clearer picture of how trends in both countries compare (fig. 3). In the five pre-pandemic years, the USA and Canada experienced an average rate of 0.107 and 0.135 challenges per 100,000 population, respectively. The lowest rate for both countries was reached in 2020, but in 2021 both countries saw significant increases, with the USA reporting at a rate of 0.219 challenges per 100,000 and Canada at a rate of 0.202 per 100,000. Despite the similarity of these two figures, the difference in base 2015-2019 rates adds some important context. The 2021 Canadian rate represents an increase by 49.6% over the average rate of 2015-2019, but the USA increased its rate by 104.7%. Canada's larger jump appeared in 2022, and the Canadian rate even surpassed the USA rate in 2023.

Reported Challenges per 100,000 pop.: USA vs Canada

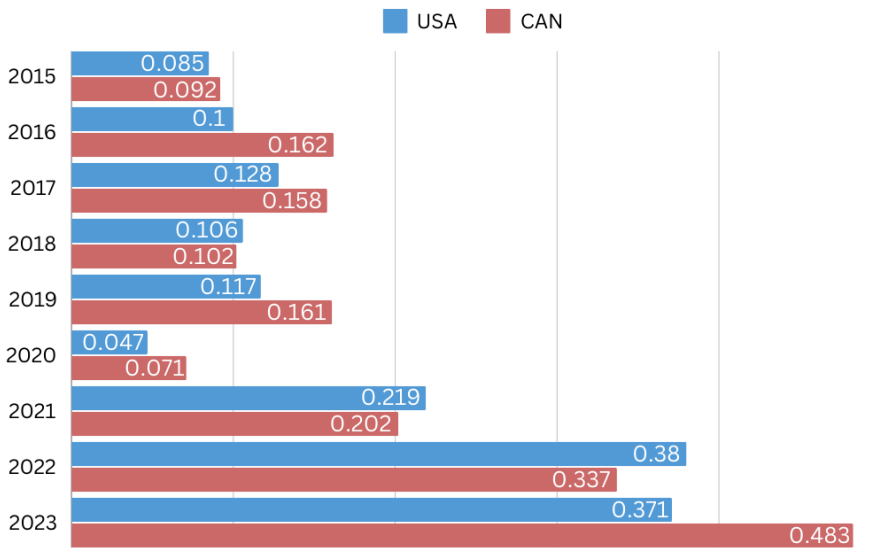


Figure 3: Comparison of challenge rates per 100,000 population.

Library associations from both countries attribute the stark post-pandemic rise in challenges to the actions of reactionary conservative popular movements (ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2022; ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023; Nyby, 2024). In the USA, the ALA reported that these movements advocated resistance primarily to resources tackling racial equity and LGBTQIA+ issues (ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2022; ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023). Though Canadian libraries did experience a small bump in challenges to materials on racial equity (a rise from zero challenges between 2015-2021 to five challenges between 2022-2023), Canada's similar post-pandemic reactionary movements focused more narrowly on LGBTQIA+ issues.

Both countries recorded large jumps in challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources in the years after the pandemic (fig. 4), though it is worth noting the difference in how those trends developed. In the USA, the rate of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources rose gradually between 2015-2021 and jumped to nearly half of all reported challenges in 2022. In contrast, Canadian challenges of the same nature remained at a steady low level, ranging between 5.1-12.1%, in the years preceding the pandemic. These challenges dropped to an extremely low level in 2020 before returning in 2021 to slightly above the earlier peak, then rising very suddenly to unprecedented levels in the following two years (fig. 5). In 2023, the Canadian rate of 49.7% of all challenges even surpassed the peak USA rate of 49.6% set in 2022. This, in conjunction with the earlier observation that Canada has now surpassed the USA in reported challenges per 100,000 population, indicates that at least, on a per capita basis, this trend is now affecting Canadian Libraries at least as severely as their counterparts in the USA.

LGBTQIA+ Challenges: Percentage share of all reported challenges

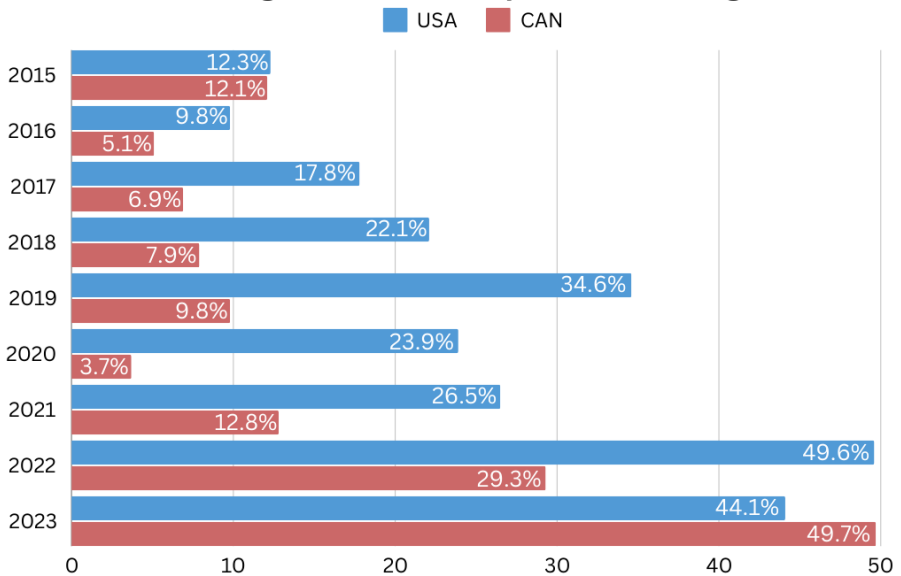


Figure 4: Comparison of incidence rates of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources.

LGBTQIA+ Challenge Trend Lines

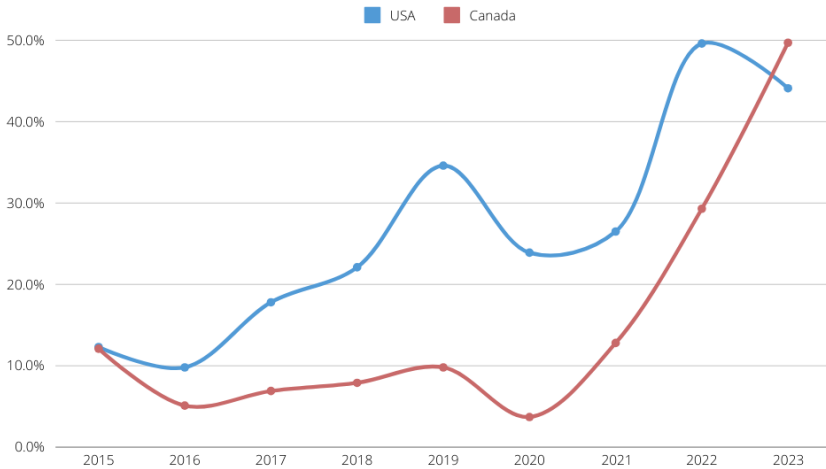


Figure 5: Trend line comparison of incidence rates of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources.

An analysis of titles challenged in both countries provides perhaps the strongest evidence that reactionary movements in the USA have had a strong influence on similar movements in Canada. Between 2015 and 2021, challenges to 2,727 unique titles were reported in the USA, compared to 303 unique titles in Canada. In 2022 and 2023, challenges to 5,573 unique titles were reported in the USA, compared to only 202 in Canada. It is curious that while the USA saw an increase in both challenges and unique titles, Canada experienced an increase in rate of challenges and a large decrease in unique titles. Title-level data also provides the opportunity to analyze the titles challenged in both countries. Between 2015 and 2021, data from the two countries shared only twenty-three common titles, seven of which involved LGBTQIA+ issues. These twenty-three titles represent a mere 6.5% of all Canadian reported challenges for this period. The number of shared titles jumps to sixty-two in the 2022-2023 period, thirty-five of which involved LGBTQIA+ issues. Shared titles in this period now comprise 30.7%, or nearly a third, of the Canadian whole.

Further analysis of the shared titles reveals more evidence of cross-border influence. *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe is the only one of the USA's ten most frequently challenged titles from the 2015-2021 period that was also challenged in Canada. In fact, of the forty-two unique entries in the combined ALA Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists ranging from 2015 to 2021, only five (11.9%) were challenged in Canada in the same time frame (American Library Association, 2023). In contrast, five of the USA's ten most frequently challenged titles appear on the list of 2022-2023 shared titles, and six of the fourteen titles (42.9%) that appear on the 2022 and 2023 ALA Top Ten Most Challenged Books lists were also challenged in Canada during the same time period. The percentages of shared titles that appear in the top 1% and 5% of the USA's most frequently challenged titles grow significantly in the later period as well (table 1). These multiple dimensions of title analysis indicate that not only is Canada experiencing a higher volume and rate of challenges to comparatively fewer titles, but the list of titles itself has evolved to more closely resemble that of the USA.

| | 2015-2021 | 2022-2023 |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| Number of shared titles | 23 | 62 |
| Number of shared titles that appear in USA top 10 most challenged | 1 | 5 |
| Percentage of shared titles that appear in USA top 1% most challenged | 20% | 23% |
| Percentage of shared titles that appear in USA top 5% most challenged | 35% | 40% |

Table 1: Analysis of titles challenged in both USA and Canada

Demographic Comparison

The available data allow for three dimensions of comparison: educational attainment, income level, and political lean. Broadly, the EveryLibrary Institute (2024) found that areas in the USA affected by book bans tended to have a higher-than-average level of educational attainment, a higher-than-average median income, and a higher concentration of registered republicans. Two of these trends held true in Canada as well, but the most common political leaning of areas reporting book challenges was towards the Liberal Party of Canada (which is more analogous to the Democratic party of the USA).

In the USA, 37.5% of adults over the age of twenty-five hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 28.5% in Canada in 2016 and 32.9% in 2021. Areas affected by book bans and challenges in both countries had a notably higher average level of education (fig. 6). This figure stood at 41.7% for areas affected by book bans in the USA (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). In Canada, the figure stood at 43.3% in the earlier 2015-2021 time frame but fell to 36.3% in 2022-2023—more than half of the way back to the national average.

Education Level: USA vs Canada

Based on percentage of residents over 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher

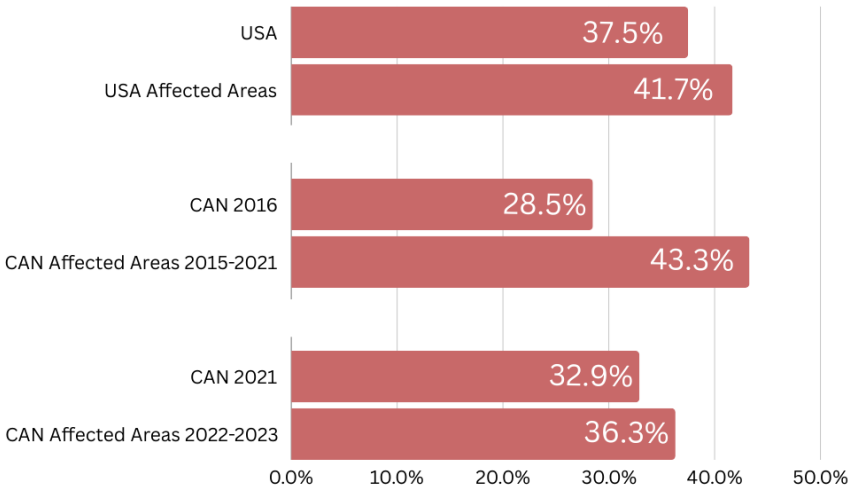


Figure 6: Comparison of educational attainment levels in both countries.

Higher income appears to correlate with higher incidence of bans and challenges in the USA, but does not seem to have any notable effect on challenge behavior in Canada (fig. 7) Areas in the USA affected by book bans had a median income of \$90,448 USD, 21.2% higher than the national median of \$74,580 USD (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). The median household income of Canadian areas affected by library challenges between 2015-2021 stood at \$70,236 CAD—a mere \$100 less than the 2015 national median of \$70,336 CAD. In 2022-2023, affected areas had a median household income of only \$1000 more than the 2021 national median (\$85,000 CAD vs \$84,000 CAD). The income differences in Canada are so slight that the numbers should be read as statistically equivalent.

Median Income: USA vs Canada

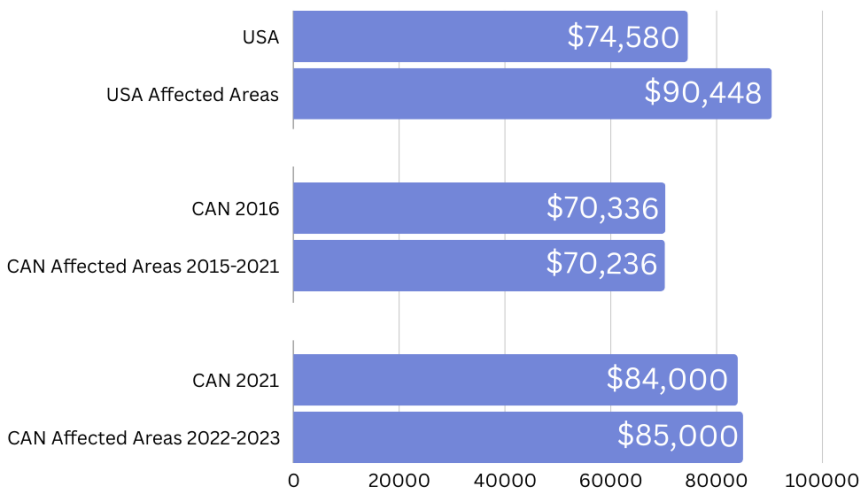


Figure 7: Comparison of median household income in both countries.

The EveryLibrary Institute (2024) reported that areas affected by book bans disproportionately leaned Republican. Based on county-level voting results from the 2020 Presidential election, 62% of affected areas voted Republican while 36% voted Democrat. This stands in contrast to the general political makeup of the country, where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans 38.8% to 29.4% (fig. 8). In Canada, areas represented by the governing Liberal Party comprised a disproportionately large percentage of affected areas during the 2015-2021 period, but the numbers regressed a close simulacrum of the general political landscape in the 2022-2023 time period (figs. 9 and 10). In the 2015-2021 period, 71.8% areas affected by challenges were represented by the governing Liberal Party of Canada, 17.4 percentage points more than the actual proportion of seats held by the Liberal Party at the time. In contrast, during the 2022-2023 period, the Liberal Party controlled 48.3% of parliamentary seats and 51.1% of affected areas, a difference of only 2.8 percentage points. In fact, in the later period, the differential between representation in parliament and representation in affected areas varied by no more than three percentage points for any party.

USA: Political Lean

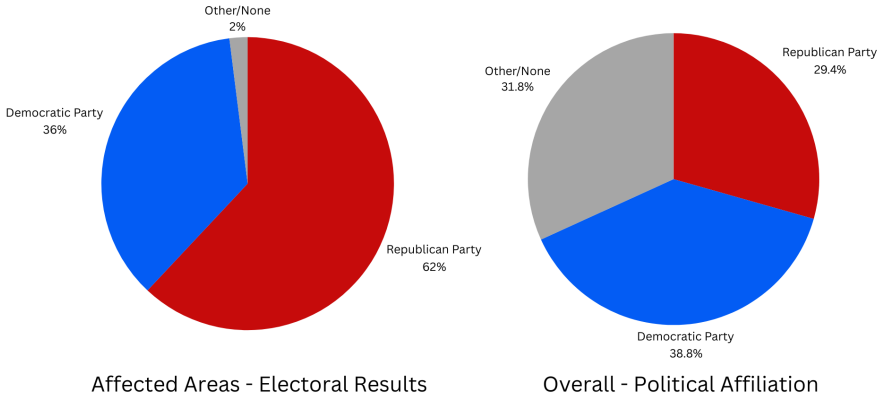


Figure 8: Political lean for affected areas and overall population of USA.

Canada: Political Representation
2015-2021

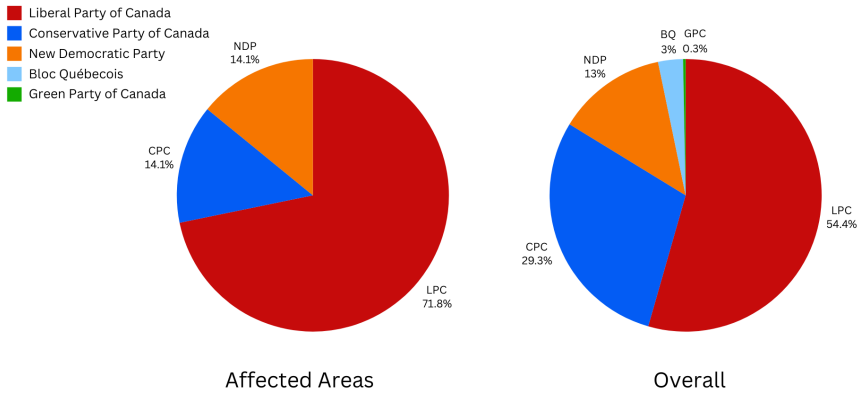


Figure 9: Political representation for affected areas and overall makeup of Canada in 2015-2021

Canada: Political Representation
2022-2023

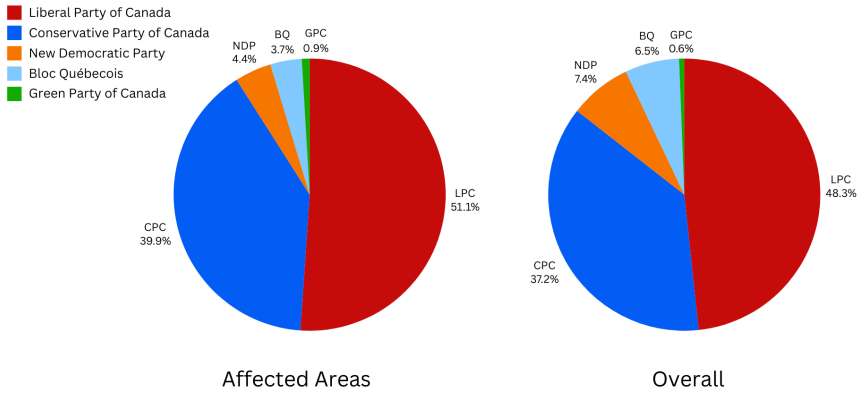


Figure 10: Political representation for affected areas and overall makeup of Canada in 2022-2023

Discussion

From a demographic perspective, the comparison of national trends shows that Canadian challenge behavior during the earlier period varied from that of the USA, but drifted more towards the USA model in the later period. This trend exists in two of the three examined demographic dimensions. A differential of almost fifteen percentage points existed between the Canadian national average educational attainment level and that of affected areas in the 2015-2021 period. However, this same differential in the 2022-2023 period was only 3.4 percentage points, much closer to the USA differential of 4.2 percentage points. We also see that the overall political lean of affected areas became more conservative in Canada during the later time period. Median income within Canadian affected areas has not changed much between the two time periods, nor has there been a shift towards USA trends. This comes as no surprise, as previous research has found that income has little or no bearing on the nature or volume of library challenges in Canada (Nyby, 2023).

The trend that is apparent in an isolated demographic analysis of Canadian library challenge behavior is one of regression to the mean. In two demographic dimensions, the demographic makeup of areas most affected by challenges more closely reflected that of the overall demographic makeup of the country in the later 2022-2023 time period. Given that increased resistance to pro-LGBTQIA+ library resources has been the major driver in the rise in Canadian challenges, a closer analysis reveals how this phenomenon is reflected specifically in challenges of this nature. One way of finding which demographic profiles were more likely to challenge these resources is to compare each demographic classification's share of overall challenges with its share of challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ resources specifically (fig. 12).

| Difference in share of challenges to LGBTQIA+ Works | | | | | | |
|---|------------|------------|--------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| | 2015-2021 | | | 2022-2023 | | |
| Age Level | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential |
| Young | 29.4% | 9.7% | -19.7% | 24.9% | 15.0% | -9.9% |
| Medium | 34.7% | 48.4% | 13.7% | 49.5% | 60.9% | 11.4% |
| Old | 35.9% | 41.9% | 6% | 25.5% | 24.1% | -1.4% |
| Education | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential |
| Low | 15% | 35.5% | 20.5% | 21.8% | 27.8% | 6.0% |
| Medium | 18.4% | 22.6% | -4.2% | 29.9% | 29.3% | -0.6% |
| High | 66.7% | 41.9% | -24.8% | 48.3% | 42.9% | -5.4% |
| Income | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential |
| Low | 23.2% | 41.9% | 18.7% | 7.8% | 7.5% | -0.3% |
| Medium | 62.1% | 41.9% | -20.2% | 67.9% | 73.7% | 5.8% |
| High | 14.7% | 16.1% | 1.4% | 24.3% | 18.8% | -5.5% |
| City Size | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential |
| Small | 10.7% | 25.8% | 15.1% | 25.2% | 29.3% | 4.1% |
| Medium | 35.3% | 48.4% | 13.1% | 31.2% | 37.6% | 6.4% |
| Large | 54% | 25.8% | -28.2% | 43.6% | 33.1% | -10.5% |
| Representation | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential | % of whole | % of LGBTQ | Differential |
| LPC | 71.8% | 48.4% | -23.4% | 51.1% | 45.9% | -5.2% |
| CPC | 14.1% | 38.7% | 24.6% | 39.9% | 44.4% | 4.5% |
| NDP | 14.1% | 12.9% | -1.2% | 4.4% | 6.8% | 2.4% |
| BQ | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 3.7% | 1.5% | -2.2% |
| GPC | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.9% | 1.5% | 0.6% |

Table 2: Shares of overall challenges and challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ resources within each demographic level, 2015-2021 and 2022-2023, Canada. Areas in which the differential between the two shares is more than ten percentage points are highlighted.

As can be seen in table 2, eleven out of fifteen existing classifications either underreported or overreported challenges of this nature by over ten percentage points, with a maximum differential of over twenty-eight points. This indicates that during this time period, libraries in areas with certain demographic profiles were significantly more likely than others to experience challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ resources. In contrast, in the 2022-2023 time period,

only two out of seventeen existing demographic classifications experienced a differential of over ten percentage points, with a maximum differential of only 11.4 points. The data reflects information shared in the comments attached to many of the period's reported challenges, particularly to drag storytime events. Several reports cite protestors arriving from "out-of-town" or "outside the area," others mention social media as a driving force in organizing resistance, and many specifically cite several influential right-wing groups—such as Action4Canada and Save Canada—who actively encourage and organize library protests in many communities (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024a). As a result, resistance to library materials appeared to spread more evenly throughout the demographic spectrum of communities.

What is curious is that prior to 2022, the general makeup of library censorship attempts in Canada leaned toward the progressive end of the ideological spectrum, especially when compared to data from the United States. This trend extends well beyond the boundaries of this study's reference period, as Peavoy (2004) noted that even more than a decade earlier that materials in Canada were more likely to be challenged "in the interest of minority protection" (p. 130). Between 2015 and 2021, the most common challenges in Canada were to materials containing perceived racism (especially towards Indigenous peoples), and challenges to homophobic and transphobic materials slightly outnumbered challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ materials. With this background, the shift in recent years seems even more dramatic. Within two years, the ideological makeup of Canadian library challenges flipped, resulting in a dataset that now appears to be even more conservative than that of the United States—primarily driven by populist anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment. This turnaround is even more striking when taken in conjunction with Canada's historically more accepting stance of non-heteronormative identities (Poushter & Kent, 2020).

Given that the sudden about-face in Canadian library censorship trends closely followed a historic increase in similar challenges in the United States, it is difficult to imagine anything other than cross-border influence as the likely catalyst. However, the timing of the rise of reactionary homophobia and transphobia and the choice of libraries as the staging area for this particular culture war battle in both countries remains an open question. Higgins (2023) posits that the economic instability of the COVID-19 era served to embolden an authoritarian right wing that attributed societal instability to "people they perceive as their enemies: 'threats'...to their ways of life, security, and moral values" (p. 122). According to Higgins, these groups have created an "appraisal of the trans 'enemy' as a figure of fascist propaganda" (p.120). Though the movement's anti-trans rhetoric has been especially pronounced, transgender communities are not the sole targets of enmity. Hate crime statistics from the USA and Canada both show large increases in reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation and on race/ethnicity (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2024). Engström et al (2024) postulate that in such a sociopolitical climate, it is likely that the library's stated objective of supporting pluralism and minority rights, compounded by concerted efforts to increase the representation of racialized, non-heteronormative, and non-cisnormative peoples in library services, has allowed the institution to become a natural target for those with authoritarian tendencies. And of course, the targeting of children's resources in particular tracks with the longstanding tendency on the part of the right to legitimize discrimination under the guise of "protecting children" (Niedwiecki, 2014). Padrón (2024) points out that of course the only children ostensibly being protected by this practice are cis- and heteronormative children; LGBTQIA+ youth are conspicuously absent from the equation.

Conclusion

Despite the seeming inevitability of the current state of affairs given such a confluence of events and conditions, many libraries and library workers have been unprepared for the recent flood of protests, challenges, and other antagonistic actions. Decades of neoliberal austerity have left many public libraries understaffed and overwhelmed, often lacking the personnel and resources necessary to create a strategy for responding to resistance efforts. Meanwhile, the deprofessionalization of school libraries has left many schools without a qualified library worker who can effectively defend a collection against censorship (Carlson, 2017). Considering the vulnerability of libraries after years of governmental neglect, it is no wonder that the institution should be selected as a focus point for reactionary ire in the United States. It is only natural that the Canadian reactionary right, after seeing the political success of American anti-library movements, simply followed suit.

The data and sociopolitical context combined serve as a reminder that libraries serve as a mirror to society and are often a flashpoint for public sentiment. The deepening polarization of popular views on subjects pertaining to diversity—whether within the context of race, sexuality, gender expression, or otherwise—are reflected both in library services and the public reaction to those services. But despite the likelihood of resistance, the continued commitment to intellectual freedom is necessary if libraries wish to amplify the voices of vulnerable groups. As Jefferson & Dziedzic-Elliot (2023) note, "a backlash is not a sign that we in the library world were actually providing the level of access to these materials that our patrons needed; it is merely a sign that we had started to get marginally closer" (p. 39).

The analysis included in this study provides the empirical basis for a narrative that can be a catalyzing force for support and advocacy: the library, once our most trusted public institution (Horrigan, 2017), is under attack. Strong and unwavering public support may be the best defense against aggressive anti-library movements, but that support may be difficult to establish without a compelling argument. This study is presented with the hope that the information included herein may be used as a tool to help build that argument and aid libraries in securing a sustainable and inclusive future.

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