

CENTRE FOR
FREE EXPRESSION

The Rising Demands for Censorship: Final Report on Challenges Faced by Canadian Libraries in 2025

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Toronto
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Centre for Free Expression
at The Creative School

About the Centre for Free Expression

The Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University focuses on issues related to freedom of expression and the public's right to know. This includes intellectual freedom, campus free expression, academic freedom, hate speech, censorship, disinformation, access-to- information, whistleblower protection, anti-SLAPP legislation, corporate and government surveillance, and freedom of the press. The CFE hosts public educational events, advocates for law reform, provides advice and assistance, assists courts, creates online resources, advises governments, and engages in advocacy on these issues. Our work is undertaken in collaboration with academic and civil society organizations across Canada and internationally.

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Thanks to the consolidation of all records of challenges reported by Canadian libraries into a single online, publicly accessible Canadian Library Challenges Database¹, we have a more comprehensive record of the number and nature of the demands for censorship reported by Canadian libraries in 2025.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that the reported numbers of challenges are likely a vast underestimate of the actual numbers since not all public libraries report challenges. Some only report challenges to items in their collections and not to their programs, exhibits and displays, community use of library space decisions, and their internet use policies. The numbers are also an underestimate because, while written “requests for reconsideration” are most likely to be reported, challenges are increasingly taking other forms that are often not submitted to the database as yet. These include public protests outside the library against a variety of library books and programs; petitions to have books removed or programs cancelled; social media campaigns against books, films, programs, community use of space, internet access; and persistent theft or vandalism of selected titles.

This is beginning to change, and these alternative forms of challenges will be increasing reflected in future reports. Another change is a new focus on encouraging school boards to report challenges to items in school libraries, and to encourage university libraries to report challenges they face.

Despite these limitations, this report on challenges for 2025 is the most complete picture of demands for censorship faced by libraries in Canada to date.

In 2025, as can be seen in Table 1, public libraries reported 116 challenges -- 98 to items in their collections, three to programs being hosted by the library, two to exhibits and displays, and 13 to decisions they had made regarding community use of library facilities. Interestingly, this is a decrease from the 141 challenges reported in 2024, of which 133 were to items in the collection, four were to library-sponsored programs, three to exhibits and displays, and one was to library computer use policy (see Table 1 below).

While the decrease in reported challenges at public libraries is hopeful news, what is happening at school libraries is deeply worrying. The decrease in public library challenges may be an indication that groups promoting censorship like Action4Canada² and Concerned Citizens Canada³ are turning their attention more to schools and school libraries and learning commons. In any case, it is important to remember that only a tiny handful of school boards have reported challenges to date – except for Alberta where in 2025

¹ The was made possible by the cooperation of the Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University, the Canadian Federation of Library Associations, Freedom to Read, and Library and Archives Canada. The database can be searched in English: <https://cfe.torontomu.ca/databases/canadian-library-challenges-database> and French: <https://cfe.torontomu.ca/databases/base-de-donnees-des-contestations-des-bibliotheques-canadiennes>

² <https://action4canada.com/>

³ https://www.instagram.com/concerned_citizens_canada/?hl=en

the Minister of Education issued a Ministerial Order demanding that school boards remove all “school literary materials containing any explicit visual depiction of a sexual act ... unless such materials are for information or reference, such as technical materials, dictionaries or encyclopedias, that are not narrative in nature.”⁴

In 2025, K-12 school boards reported 384 challenges (See Table 1). Of these, 382 challenges were to items in the school library collections and two to school library sponsored programs.

Province	Public Libraries	School Libraries	Academic Libraries	Total (% of total)
Alberta	23	361	2	386 (77%)
British Columbia	25	8	0	33 (7%)
Manitoba	0	14	0	14 (3%)
New Brunswick	0	0	0	0
Newfoundland	0	0	0	0
Northwest Territories	0	0	0	0
Nova Scotia	1	1	0	2 (>1%)
Nunavut	0	0	0	0
Ontario	66	0	0	66 (13%)
PEI	0	0	0	0
Quebec	0	0	0	0
Saskatchewan	1	0	0	1 (>1%)
Yukon	0	0	0	0
Total for Canada	116	384	2	502 (100%)

In 2024, there were only 13 reported challenges from school boards, and all were to items in their school library collections.

What is especially notable is that 360 of the 384 school library challenges (94%) were the result of the Ministerial Order in Alberta and all 360 of the books were removed from the schools – making it the largest book ban in Canadian history. The one other Alberta school challenge was by a parent, and the board removed the book.

This book ban in Alberta schools also gave Alberta the dubious honour of being the province with 77% of all challenges reported by all libraries in Canada. Second in total number was Ontario with 66 challenges (13%), followed by British Columbia with 33 (7%).

The principal target of the Alberta Government-ordered book ban was young adult graphic novels. When the Alberta Minister first announced his intention to remove sexually-explicit books from school libraries, he named four books that exemplified what he wanted banned: *Gender Queer*, a graphic novel by Maia

⁴ [https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/Documents/MinOrders/2025/Education and Childcare/2025_034 Education and Childcare.pdf](https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/Documents/MinOrders/2025/Education%20and%20Childcare/2025_034_Education_and_Childcare.pdf)

Kobabe; *Fun Home*, graphic novel by Alison Bechdel; *Flamer*, graphic novel by Mike Curato; and *Blankets*, graphic novel by Craig Thompson.⁵

His announcement and his choice of these four books are notable for several reasons. First, while he is reported as saying that he became aware of the books at a recent meeting with Alberta parents, getting him to take action was actually the result of concerted work by a cross-Canada, alt-right organization, Action4Canada, that had been pushing him for months to get rid of these graphic novels for young adults from schools. Action4Canada had been working unsuccessfully for several years to get books on sex education, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ friendly books removed from public libraries and more recently school libraries. Immediately after the Minister named these four graphic novels as exemplifying books that had to be removed from school libraries, Action4Canada revealed its role and its gratitude in a website posting:

“Action4Canada is pleased to announce A MASSIVE WIN in Alberta against the pornographic books! Most importantly, this is a victory for our precious children. PRAISE GOD!

Thank you to the Alberta Minister of Education, Demetrios Nicolaidis, for meeting with **Action4Canada’s** team, responding to our concerns and acknowledging the evidence of sexually explicit materials in Alberta schools. It is a positive step toward restoring morality and common sense in education.”⁶

The other notable thing about the Minister’s choice of books to target is that the four books he named as examples of what had to be removed are all highly regarded, award-winning young adult graphic novels that address difficult issues that deeply concern many teens.

Scott Thompson’s *Blankets*, for example, has been translated into more than 20 languages, received many book awards, and has been described by the *Guardian Weekly* as “One of the best graphic novels of all time” and by *Time* magazine as “a great American novel.” *Publishers Weekly*’s review said, “Thompson manages to explore adolescent social yearnings, the power of young love and the complexities of sexual attraction with a rare combination of sincerity, pictorial lyricism and taste.”⁷

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* has received widespread critical acclaim:

- *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review):
“Bechdel’s memoir offers a graphic narrative of uncommon richness, depth, literary resonance and psychological complexity... Though this will likely be stocked with graphic novels, it shares as much in spirit with the work of Mary Karr, Tobias Wolff, and other contemporary memoirists of considerable literary accomplishment.”
- *Library Journal* (starred review):
“Bechdel ... paints her own story in this stunning graphic memoir... One of the best graphic memoirs to date.”
- *Time Magazine*:
“At once a coming-out story, an examination of the complex relationship we can have with our parents, and the role of art and literature in processing our lives, first-time graphic novelist Alison

⁵ <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=9336987AB9FD0-F557-7087-E667F070F212CF05>

⁶ <https://action4canada.com/massive-win-in-alberta-against-pornographic-books-in-schools/>

⁷ CFE Profile of *Blankets* <https://cfe.torontomu.ca/book/blankets>

Bechdel's *Fun Home* made for a stunning debut... Smart, darkly funny and a little fearless, *Fun Home* reads like a true-life modern American Gothic.”

It, too, has been translated into many languages and received numerous book awards.⁸

Mike Curato's *Flamer*, too, has received widespread critical acclaim:⁹

- *School Library Journal* (starred review):
“Curato has created a beautiful story of a teen who must decide if he will force himself into the mold of what he thinks a ‘normal’ boy is, or if he can allow himself to live life on his own terms. An essential book that shows readers that they are never alone in their struggles
- *Booklist* (starred review):
“Just as his deft artwork meticulously balances between blazing feelings and quiet contemplation of natural beauty, Curato gives Aiden a poignantly well-rounded character: for all the homophobia and racism inherent in institutions like the Boy Scouts and the Catholic church, Aiden still defiantly finds inspiration and strength there. Masterfully nuanced and stunningly told, this is visual storytelling at its finest.”
- *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
“[T]he true star of this book is the writing, which describes a boy who could live in any decade on his journey of self-discovery. This is a story that will be read and reread, and for some, it will be the defining book of their adolescence.”

Finally, Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, one of the most challenged books in the U.S., likewise has received good critical reviews, won literary awards, and been translated in multiple languages:

- *School Library Journal* (starred review):
“It's also a great resource for those who identify as nonbinary or asexual as well as for those who know someone who identifies that way and wish to better understand.”
- *Publisher's Weekly*:
“This heartfelt graphic memoir relates, with sometimes painful honesty, the experience of growing up non-gender-conforming.... [It's] sure to spark valuable discussions at home and in classrooms.”
- *San Francisco Book Review*:
“Regardless of who you are or how you identify, this graphic novel will speak to you ...Throughout this intensely honest and poignant memoir, Maia struggles with things like fitting in as a homeschooled kid, being terrified of puberty, and struggling to ask people to use is preferred pronouns ... Maia Kobabe tells is story with such skill, beauty, and feeling that you won't be able to put it down or resist its magnetic emotional pull.”

Targeting these books is part of the disturbing pattern in 2025 reported challenges -- the focus was on books for children and youth (See Table 2) and especially on books that address issues of sex education,

⁸ CFE Profile of *Fun Home*: <https://cfe.torontomu.ca/book/fun-home-family-tragicomic>

⁹ CFE Profile of *Flamer*: <https://cfe.torontomu.ca/book/flamer>

gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as other important issues in the lives of many teens such as, family discord, self-worth, sexual violence, bullying, self-image.

Book's Audience	School Libraries	Public Libraries	Academic Libraries	Total
General/Adult	0	49	2	51 (10%)
Youth	382	17	0	399 (80%)
Children	2	50	0	52 (10%)
Total for Canada	384	116	2	502 (100%)

Consistent with a pattern of many years, 88% of all challenges reported by public libraries in 2025 were initiated by members of the public. (See Table 3 below).

The picture is different for school libraries. Since the reporting of challenges at school libraries is at an early stage, the numbers are small except for Alberta where the Ministerial Order accounted for all but one of the challenges in Alberta school libraries, and it accounted for 94% of all reported school library challenges in Canada. The government ordered ban also accounted for 72% of all reported challenges received by all types of libraries in all of Canada in 2025.

Challenger	Public Libraries	School Libraries	Academic Libraries	Total Challenges	Total Removed/Cancelled
Member of Public	102 (88%)	4 (<1%)	0	106(21%)	2
Organization	5 (4%)	14 (4%)	1 (50%)	20 (4%)	
Staff	8 (7%)	5 (1%)	1 (50%)	14 (3%)	5
Board Member	0	0	0	0	
Administration	0	1 (<1%)	0	1 (<1%)	
Government	0	360 (94%)	0	360 (72%)	360
Politician	1 (1%)	0	0	1 (<1%)	
Media	0	0	0	0	
Total	116 (100%)	384(100%)	2 (100%)	502 (100%)	367

When anyone but government challenges a book, the library reviews whether the item is consistent with its material selection policy and, if so, typically retains it. Since libraries take their material selection policies very seriously, few books acquired, few programs planned, and few exhibits and displays authorized fail to meet library boards' policy standards. Hence it is rare for a challenged item to be removed or cancelled. However, when a government issues an order challenging a book or a class of books, it is effectively a book ban since all book so designated by a government order must be removed. In 2025, of the 502 challenges, all 360 books that were subject of the Alberta Ministerial Order were removed. In only seven of the

remaining 140 challenges was removal or program cancellation found to be justified. That means action by the Government of Alberta accounted for 98% of all book removals from all libraries in Canada last year.

Ten Most Challenged Books in Canadian Libraries in 2025

1. Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman* (series)
2. Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead* (series)
3. Brian K. Vaughan, *The Last Man* (series)
- 4 (tied). Kanoko Sakurakoji, *Black Bird* (series)
4. Brian K. Vaughan, *Saga* (series)
6. Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*
- 7 (tied). Craig Thompson, *Blankets*
7. Alan Moore, *The Watchman* (Series)
7. Matyas Namai / George Orwell, *1984: The Graphic Novel*
10. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaids Tale - Graphic Novel*

