

# Intellectual Freedom & Censorship

## *Impact in Massachusetts & Beyond*

*Intellectual freedom* is the right of every individual to information from all viewpoints without restriction. The library profession's core values and ethics are committed to supporting all members of a community by providing reliable information, quality service and diverse resources. *Censorship* occurs when library materials, programs, exhibits and displays are removed or kept from public access.

### A national movement that's taking hold in Massachusetts

According to the American Library Association (ALA), library staff in every state are facing an [unprecedented number of attempts to ban books](#). ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 729 challenges to library, school, and university materials and services in 2021, resulting in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals. [Most targeted books](#) were by or about Black or LGBTQ+ persons. [Massachusetts has also seen a dramatic surge](#) in book challenges and disturbances. Combined formal and informal challenges, objections, disruptions have nearly quadrupled since 2021, going from a combined total of 20 in 2021 to 78 in 2022.

### Often connected to a national political agenda

According to [a report by PEN America](#), there are at least 50 groups involved in pushing for book bans across the country operating at the national, state or local levels. Of those 50 groups, eight have local or regional chapters that, between them, number at least 300 in total; some of these operate predominantly through social media. PEN America estimates that at least 40 % of the bans counted in the [Index of School Book Bans](#) for the 2021–22 school year are connected to political pressure exerted by state officials or elected lawmakers.

### Free, equal and open to all

Free, equal and open to all—Massachusetts Libraries were [first in the world](#) to offer residents this kind of access and public libraries are still the only place that levels the playing field. On any given day, people from a variety of income levels, backgrounds, ages, race, abilities, and gender identities will be using library services. This fosters communities where differences aren't just tolerated, they're valued.

### The issue is bigger than book challenges

Book challenges are not new. The right to question library materials is part of living in a free society. It's a right we all enjoy under the First Amendment. The issue is that recent challenges target books and programs that represent specific community members: most recently LGBTQ+ and people of color. Every member of a community deserves to see themselves reflected in a library's collection. No group has the right to impose its own beliefs and viewpoints upon other members of a democratic society.

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## Book selection is not based on personal opinion or beliefs

To meet the informational needs of every member of a community, professional librarians seek materials on a broad range of subject matter that reflect diverse experiences. Librarians select materials in keeping with their libraries' policies and the Library Bill of Rights. The [Library Bill of Rights](#) was adopted by the American Library Association in 1939 in response to the censorship taking place during World War II. Massachusetts general law, [chapter 79, section 33](#), requires libraries to have a collection development policy.

## Libraries have books and programs that may differ from your own views

Providing access to information and viewpoints to those seeking them without judgement is an important part of a library's mission. With more than 80 million items and 70,000 programs attended by 1.3 million people each year, Massachusetts libraries have books and host programs that not everyone will find beneficial. It's important to keep in mind, that what one person finds meaningful, another might not.

## What caregivers need for their own children varies

Every child is unique. Caregivers often rely on developmentally appropriate books and resources to help their children understand the world around them. What one caregiver may deem unsuitable; another may need to help a young person understand a sensitive topic. Books that represent diverse voices and experiences help kids navigate life's complex and challenging issues. The benefits of providing children and youth with books which reflect diverse experiences can be found in the "[Empowered by Reading Report](#)".

## Impact that lasts beyond the book ban

As the Massachusetts American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD) state in a [recent letter](#):

**"Removing books that reflect students' experiences not only removes a support; it tells a student that they and their community are not accepted by their teachers and peers."**

## Ways to get involved



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- School boards and library boards of trustees benefit from members who understand the importance of intellectual freedom.
- Public and school libraries need support both in-person (at meetings and protests) and online.
- ALA's [Unite Against Book Bans](#) is a national initiative to empower readers everywhere to stand together in the fight against censorship.

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