

Colorado Public Library Challenges to Materials and Services: 2023

Every year, Library Research Service surveys Colorado public libraries about challenges to their materials or services as part of the Public Library Annual Report survey (PLAR.) The libraries that report receiving one or more challenges are then asked to optionally provide additional information, which is shared in this report. The data below do not necessarily cover all challenges reported on the PLAR survey and are only a snapshot of occurrences throughout the state. A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based on the objections of a person or group (www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport).

In 2023 there were 104 challenges. That's a 13% decrease from 2022.

Number of Challenges Over 10 Years

In 2023, Colorado saw a slightly lower number of challenges than in the record-setting year 2022. According to the American Library Association, public libraries nationally saw a 92% increase in the number of challenged books, while Colorado saw a 13% decrease. Note that not all people responded to every question. The number of challenges per year taken from the Colorado PLAR data are as follows:

- 2013: 19 challenges
- 2014: 28 challenges
- 2015: 29 challenges
- 2016: 22 challenges
- 2017: 41 challenges
- 2018: 43 challenges
- 2019: 19 challenges
- 2020: 10 challenges
- 2021: 20 challenges
- 2022: 120 challenges
- 2023: 104 challenges

Challenge Subject Matter

We asked survey participants "Why did the [challenge] initiator say this [item] was of concern?" and from those answers created a list of commonly cited challenge subject matter. The most commonly challenged subject in 2023 was "sexual content" with

roughly half of challenges involving the subject. LGBTQIA+ continues to be a commonly challenged subject with about a third of challenges including it. 40% of challenges that focused on LGBTQIA+ content were specifically about transgender people, and 27% were about drag queens.

When investigating individual book titles, we found that about half of them were challenged more than once and the majority of the titles with multiple challenges were challenged for LGBTQIA+ subject matter. Since subjects were self-described this year, some categories are different and cannot be compared longitudinally.

The percentages of subject matter in complaints are as follows:

- Sexual Content: 47%
- LGBTQIA+: 33%
- Violence: 11%
- Adult Content: 11%
- Political Views: 4%
- Religious Views: 4%
- Alcohol: 4%
- Other: 9%

Requested Action in Challenges

When asked to describe the incident, two major themes arose regarding requested actions: requests to move items out of the children's area of the library (33% of requests) and to remove items entirely from the library (also 33% of requests). In 13% of requests, complainants requested libraries to implement a barrier between patrons and books, such as placing books in locked cabinets or behind glass. Note that not all incidents reports included requested actions.

In all of the challenges in which details were reported, official library processes were followed. 32% of these challenges occurred in April, and nearly half occurred in April and May combined.

The percentages of each characteristic's appearance in the incidents are as follows:

- Move out of Children's: 33%
- Remove Item Entirely: 33%
- Overturn Director Decision: 20%
- Physical Barrier: 13%

Complainant Characteristics

Most complainants were residents in the library's legal service area (98%) and were identified as patrons complaining on their own behalf (73%.) 19% of complainants were parents or caregivers expressing concern about something that affects their child, 8% were community members or groups, and 4% were staff. Note that the complainant could be part of multiple groups.

Format of Challenged Items

A large shift in 2023 was the format of the challenged item. In previous years, challenges to events were much more common (44% in 2022 versus 0% in 2023.) This year, nearly all challenges were to library materials.

Result of Challenge

The majority of challenges (84%) resulted in no change to the item or service. 4% of items were withdrawn from the collection and 9% moved to another part of the library. Note numbers don't add up to 100% due to rounding.

Want to Learn More?

For a full list of challenged titles and services, please visit <https://www.lrs.org/public/data/challenges/>. Questions or concerns? Contact lrs@lrs.org.

Publishing Information and Credits

Author: Amy Bahlenhorst, Research Analyst
www.lrs.org LRS@LRS.org
Fast Facts ED3/110.10/No.371
November, 2024 Library Research Service

Credits to:

- Institute of Museum and Library Services (this project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.)
- Library Research Service
- Colorado Department of Education; Colorado State Library.