

CFLA-FCAB Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey

2021 Report

Introduction

The year 2021 saw reporting return to traditional levels with seventy-three incidents reported. The reporting across Canada was uneven, as can be seen below in Figure 2. East of Ontario, Quebec libraries reported a single incident and only Nova Scotia reported incidents from the Atlantic provinces. This pattern is not new, and the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) is determined to address the matter by improving the French language environment (you may be reading a French version of this report, the first time such as been available) and encouraging the Atlantic Provinces to create, on the model of BCLA, its own committee to increase local involvement across the region. The IFC encourages all provincial, regional, and territorial associations to consider the possibility of creating such a body.

This year set several records. One title (*Irreversible Damage* by Abigail Shrier) was subject to more complaints than any other title in the history of the survey. This year saw the largest number of complaints initiated by library staff in the history of the survey. While almost three quarters of the incidents involved no social media, it is clear that social and traditional media can encourage the viewing of online catalogues and the placing of challenges through email, regardless of the residency of the complainant.

It is also clear that issues involving gender have a prominence today that they have not had traditionally.

This report does not stand alone, but is linked to the 2021 List of Titles, Services and Programs and to the 2021 Data report. The three documents, and three similar documents soon to be posted concerning 2020, signify the recovery of this project from the disruptions that the dissolution of CLA-ACB and the creation of CFLA-FCAB.

Because the IFC values the input Canadian librarians have made since 2007, this year will see the creation of a complete suite of reports for each year. This is in addition to the comprehensive database covering the entire period that is now supporting academic research on intellectual freedom issues.

A word about this report in the contest of other reports from the project. This report continues the interrupted tradition of annual reports for posting on the CFLA-FCAB IFC website. It will be followed by a supplementary report to the 2023 Freedom to Read Week, covering incidents that occurred between 1 September 2021 and 31 August 2022. All libraries are encouraged to enter reports as they occur and not wait until the end of the year.

If you think that this is a shameless plug for increased participation, you are not wrong.

In the following report, you may learn more about the details of the survey and the handling of challenges in libraries than you wished to know. For a respite, review the Data file, posted here¹, and listen to the voices of librarians and community members as they negotiate social change. Or look at the list of Titles, Services and Programs², to get a sense of the texture of 2021.

If you have questions or comments about the Survey or this report, please contact us at IFCchair@cfla-fcab.ca.

Thanks to all the library staff who make this report possible.

Signed

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¹ Link to Data file for 2021

² Link to 2021 Titles, Services and Programs List

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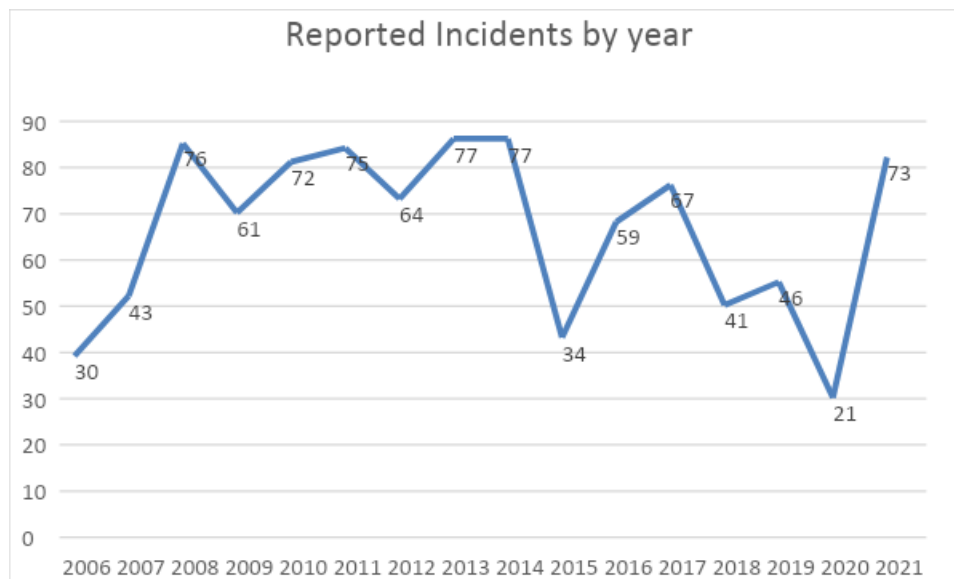
Preface

This report covers those incidents that took place in 2021 and were reported to the Survey prior to April 3, 2022. Incidents from 2021 reported subsequently will be added to the comprehensive database in January 2023 along with all other reports made in calendar 2022. Reports entered after April 3, 2022, that deal with incidents that took place between 1 September 2021 and 31 August 2023 will be included in the Freedom to Read Week article for 2023.

Part I: Overview

After a lull in reporting, the number of challenges reported rose in 2021 to seventy-three, similar to the experience of the survey in the early teens. The full descriptions of incidents and the responses of libraries can be found here³, while a list of titles to materials challenged can be found here⁴. It should be noted that all incidents reported occurred in public libraries.

Figure 1: Annual Number of Incidents



The distribution of the reports across Canada can be seen in the following table. The distribution suggests that additional communication is called for.

Figure 2: Distribution of reported incidents by province or territory.

³ Link to Data file for 2021

⁴ Link to 2021 Titles, Services, Programs List

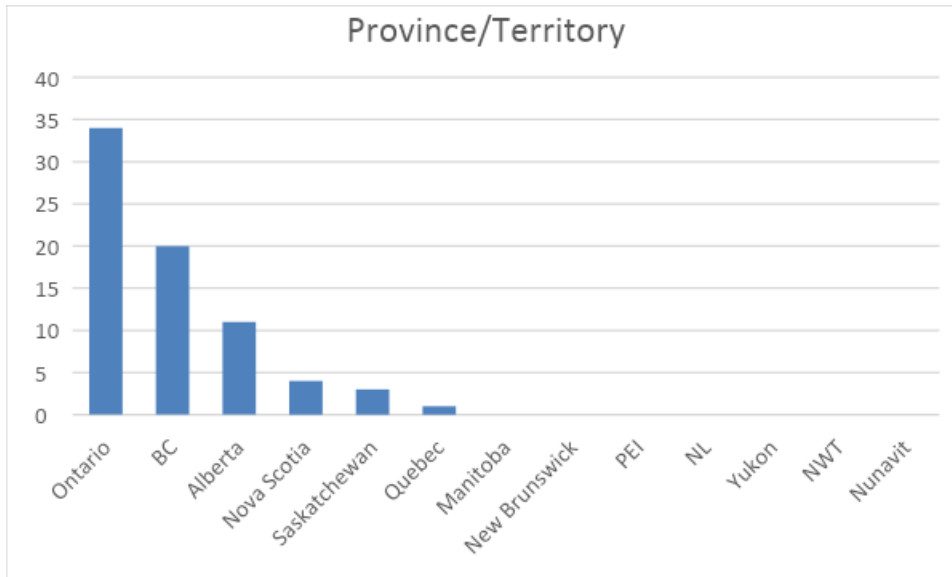
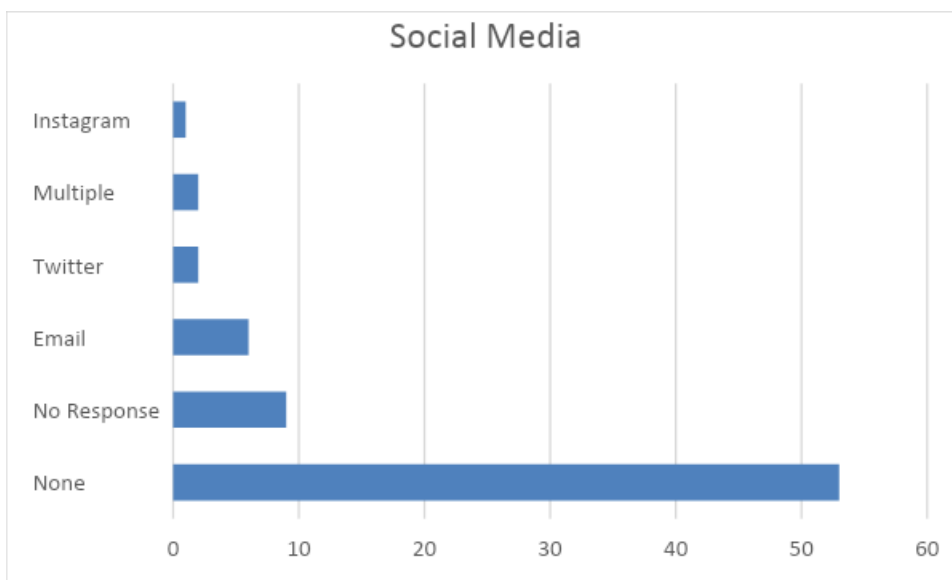


Figure 3: The role of social media

This topic will be examined at greater depth below, but the table below reports the number of social media platforms that were involved in the individual incidents, as tagged by the respondents.



Response times

In 2021, five complaints were reported resolved the same day they were initiated. In six cases resolution dates were not entered and in four cases dates prior to the incident date were entered, probably typos. The average elapsed time from the sixty-three cases in which valid dates were entered for the resolution, was between twenty-six and twenty-seven calendar days. The median length of time was fourteen days. In the twenty-one cases in which no written

complaint was made, the average time to resolution was 10 days, and the median time was three. For the forty incidents in which a writing complaint was filed, the average time to resolution was between thirty-one and thirty-two days; median value: fourteen.

The term “resolution” needs to be understood as the last date on which the library contacted the complainant. It is usual that such contacts are not returned, and the matter is considered resolved without a formal acknowledgement from the complainant.

Figure 4: Complainants

The distribution of complainants among the entire body of reports is presented below.

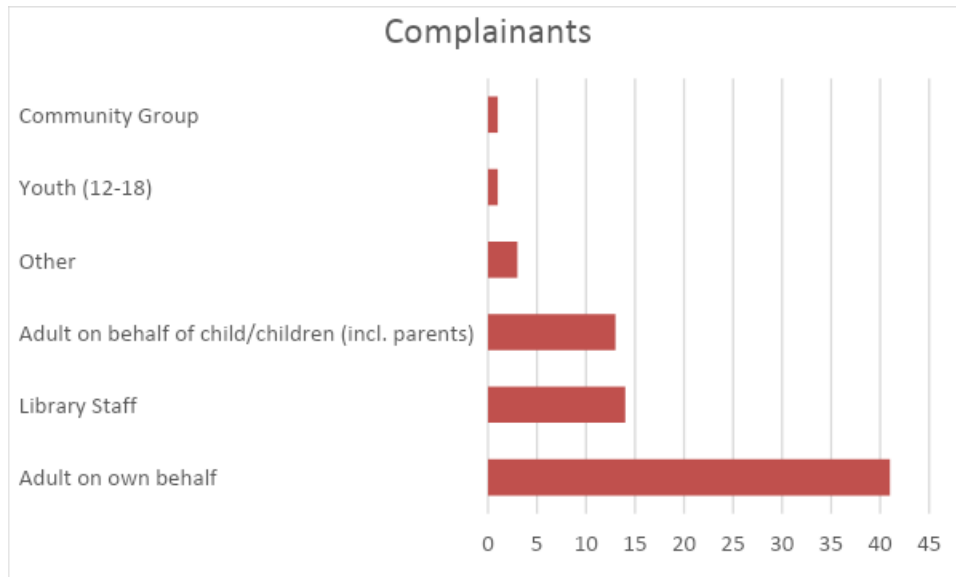
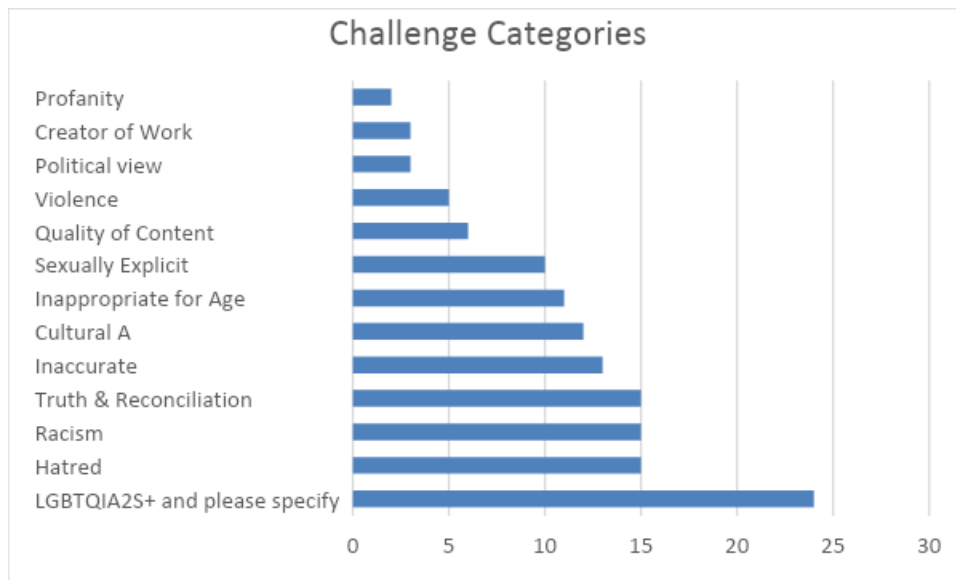


Figure 5: Categories of complaints

The Survey allows multiple labels for a single complaint. Therefore, the count of labels used is greater than the number of complaints.



Types of complaint

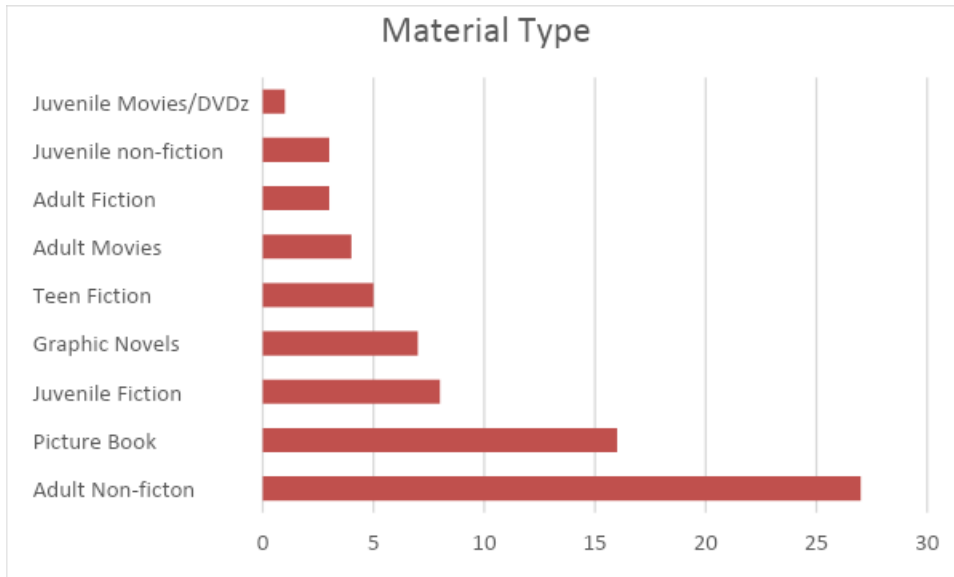
There were only two incidents involving services and programs. In an incident related to library services, a patron challenged the library’s decision to function as an information centre for COVID-19, on the ground that the public health measures were similar to restrictions on individual freedoms found in East European countries.

In an incident related to Library programming, the announcement of a “Reading with Royalty” story time provoked a considerable negative response from the community. COVID-19 restrictions intervened, and the program, scheduled for May 2021 was finally offered in October. This incident was one of two reported in which the matter was presented at a meeting of the library’s Board.

The remaining seventy-one incidents involved either Movies (5) or books (66).

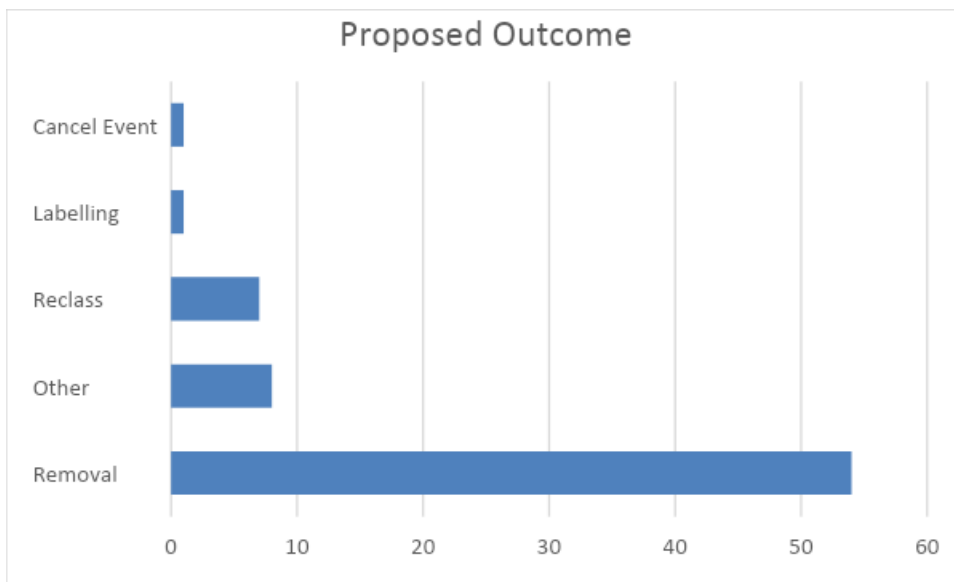
Figure 6: Format of challenged materials.

The distribution of complaints among the categories of materials is presented below.



The total reflects a small number of multiply classified titles.

Figure 7: Proposed solutions:



In five of the eight "Other" solutions, there is no clear recommendation. In two, the proposal is effectively to remove the work and in one case, the proposal was to purchase the title that the complainant had erroneously claimed to be in the collection. In two cases, the complainant did propose an action, but the description of the incident also suggests that removal was the intent of the complainant.

Figure 8: Realized Outcomes



The term “resolution” has been dealt with above.

Part II: Observations

Beyond the statistical picture presented above, a few topics warrant individual attention.

The role of social media in the matter of *Irreversible Damage*.

The twitter link (<https://twitter.com/LiamProst/status/1388550471468478467>) dated May 1, 2021, included a thread of that date illustrating great interest in Toronto Public’s holdings of the title. Shortly thereafter, CTV carried a story about a challenge at Ottawa Public.

(<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/parent-calls-on-ottawa-public-library-to-remove-controversial-book-about-transgender-youth-1.5412620>) and the next day there was a challenge in Saskatchewan.

In the month between May 1 and June 4, there were six reported challenges, followed by a seventh on July 7, a month later, and another a month after that, on August 10. The final reported challenge was recorded two months later, on October 7.

It should be noted that the May-June incidents were not the first related to this title. In 2020 there was a single reported challenge to this title, in an Ontario public library on September 25. The next reported challenge occurred on January 13, 2021, in a different Ontario public library. These two early challenges were followed by one in Halifax on the fourth of March and another in Ontario on the nineteenth. There were no complaints about this title recorded in April.

These instances would seem to suggest that news media and social media combined to create a heightened awareness in a brief period, but it is notable that the twitter post contained references to Toronto Public renting public space to Meghan Murphy in 2019. If the prominence of *Irreversible Damage* seemed sudden, it built on previous controversies.

It is instructive to consider another title. *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*, by Helen Joyce was challenged in British Columbia on the eighth of August with no further challenges being reported. The work explores the same grounds as *Irreversible Damage*, is similar, albeit somewhat more sober, to *Irreversible Damage*, targeting what it sees as a powerful and destructive movement.

The book was reviewed positively in *Feminist Current* in November, but to date, there have been no challenges to the work despite its presence in several large urban libraries. That there has not been an outbreak of complaints may be due less to the nature of the arguments presented by the author than to a lack of notoriety in North America. It was a *Sunday Times* best seller in the UK.

It is also notable that the incident in Halifax in early March did not generate the interest in the rest of Canada that the incidents in Ontario did, despite involving a petition on change.org and coverage in the *Halifax Examiner*. It is difficult to say whether CTV coverage or the fact that incidents occurred in central Canada is the more crucial factor.

Gender and sex

From the 2021 reports, it can be said that issues around gender were more prominently reported than incidents concerning explicit (heterosexual) sexuality. Of eleven titles that mentioned explicit sexuality, either as classifications or in the descriptions of the complaint, seven appear to reflect traditional concerns relating to the depiction of sexual acts without reference to gender. Three, including two related to the graphic novel *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, involve depictions of sexual acts during a narrative concerning non-heterosexual topics. One title is difficult to classify in this way.

On the other hand, there were twenty-four instances in which the treatment of queer issues was the basis for complaint. This contrasts with reports from 2020 that the treatment of queer issues equaled the number of complaints about explicit (heterosexual) sexuality. (4 in each case)

It should be noted that the bulk of the instances involved the defense of queer portrayals, while a minority found such portrayals distasteful.

Library Staff as Complainants

The number of challenges initiated by library staff is striking (14)⁵. There were none such in 2020 and in 2018 and 2019 combined (total 114 incidents) there were only six. No two incidents involved the same issue.

All libraries reporting the 2021 incidents had formal procedures in place and all the complaints by staff were made in writing. The average time from challenge to resolution for staff-initiated

⁵ Since our survey does not break out staff into categories, we can make no assumption about the level of staff involved.

incidents, was fifty-four calendar days compared to an average of 31 days for all incidents in which written complaints were registered.

In two cases, the proposal was to reclassify the item. In the remaining twelve the proposal was to remove the item. One of the two proposed re-classifications took place, in the other there was no change in status. In four of the remaining twelve proposed removals, the status of the item was not changed. In eight cases, the item was removed.

The character of those eight titles (eight of the nine cases of removal reported in 2021) is interesting. First, all are French language titles published in France. They share this characteristic with one of the challenged titles in 2019. Secondly, six of the nine show non-indigenous characters wearing stereotypical indigenous dress, also in common with the 2019 incident. Two were challenged based on language offensive to indigenous people, (e.g., "Maudit indiens") and one case in which the perceived problem is not clear.

Note that these challenges amount to more than half the challenges reported in the Picture Book category. Three similar works so challenged were not removed.

Finally, the fact that, whatever the motivation, the reporting libraries recognized this activity as falling within the framework of intellectual freedom and treated the incidents with care and consideration, including reporting to the Challenges Survey, is important.

This approach suggests an institutional maturity and a commitment to transparency in a contested area. Those libraries have chosen against two other options: treating staff concerns differently than the concerns of the rest of the community, and declining to report staff concerns, regardless of internal processes.